

## YA CAN'T MAKE ME

One Sunday morning, a college student volunteered to help in worship by doing the children's sermon. She wanted to talk about how to be a friendly church, so after getting the children up front, she began by asking this question. "What would you do if a stranger came to our church?" Immediately, one of the kindergartners raised his hand and said, "I'd run away and find my mom."

Another chimed in, "I'd say NO! And go tell my Sunday School teacher!" One after another the children told the young woman how they would avoid making contact with this stranger. She tried another tactic.

Well what would happen if a new child in town was visiting our church for the first time? Wouldn't you be nice to him? "Sure!" one of the children said. "But if he was a stranger, I wouldn't be nice to him!" "What would happen if you were the stranger?" the young lady tried for the third time. You know that look of desperation you get on your face when you know what you're trying to do is going down the drain in a hurry? Well that was the look she had on her face. "How would you like to be treated? Wouldn't you want them to smile at you and greet you like a friend?" One of the more thoughtful children replied, "Well yes, but not if they were strangers!"

You see, what the young lady did not realize was that she had used a code word that those little children knew very well. Stranger danger is a key program many communities are using to keep their children safe. They are warned over and over again to watch out for strangers. Strangers can be a real source of danger, a problem that has become a part of our modern society. Once those children heard the code word, our young lady was going to fight an uphill and losing battle. They were not going to let any stranger get near them, even if it was in the church.

I am sure you remember a time in your life when some parent or other adult warned you about dealing with people you don't know. Whether it was some transient begging for coins on a city street, or some con artist offering you an opportunity to win big money at a game of chance at a carnival, or some individual handing out some kind of tracts on a street corner, somebody probably told you to keep your distance and save your money.

There was a father and his family heading home from church on a lonely highway when they passed a car with its hood up, obviously in trouble. The owner of the car looked dirty and unshaven and was sitting on the ground before his rusty vehicle. His young son saw the man and said, "Daddy,

aren't we going to help him?" The father, who knew of the dangers of stopping to help strangers on a highway, said, "No, we have to get to the restaurant before they stop serving lunch."

The little boy continued, "But he looks like he could really use some help. Shouldn't we help?" "We just don't have time," the father snapped back. The boy then asked, "Is this kind of like the parable of the Good Samaritan that we studied this morning in Sunday School?" Why are children so good at getting to the point of things?

We have a similar situation in this morning's scripture lesson. Jesus was headed towards Jerusalem and was passing through a village in Samaria. An advance team of two disciples was telling of his plans so that preparations could be made. But the people of this Samaritan village had no intentions of welcoming this Jewish evangelist on his way through town, heading to Jerusalem.

The disciples were stunned at the insulting attitude the people displayed. How dare they refuse to welcome Jesus! Here was the most revered religious leader of the day passing through their village, and they didn't even want him to stop. The disciples suggested that they call down a bolt of lightning from heaven to teach these ingrates a lesson. Jesus rebuked the disciples and headed for another village.

I suspect that those villagers in that Samaritan town had been told to be wary of strangers, especially Jewish strangers. There was no love lost between the Jews and the Samaritans. That was why the story of the Good Samaritan was so surprising to the listeners of Jesus when he told it. As far as the Jews were concerned, nothing good ever came out to Samaria. And the Samaritans felt the same way about the Jews. They probably figured that Jesus might use his visit to get in some kind of shot at the faithlessness of the Samaritans. This Jewish stranger was probably up to no good.

The villagers had been trained to JUST SAY NO! Avoid trouble before it began. Don't let those strangers get to you. And that approach is good for children and the naïve. You never know when someone is going to bomb your village or blow up a bus. Someone might be out to kidnap you for some terrible reason. You always have to have your guard up.

The problem with learning to "JUST SAY NO" is that you might miss saying yes to a life-changing visitor. The people in that Samaritan village never knew what they missed when Jesus passed by. In some ways, it might have been better if the disciples had called fire down from heaven. The, there would have been real evidence that something incredible had been missed. The way it happened, no one in the village could really be sure that they had missed something important. Jesus came to offer them life and they never even knew it. It is like little children and vegetables; sometimes you can force them to take a bite, but you can't force them to like the stuff that's good for

them. But the passage in Luke goes on. It moves from those who said, "NO," to those who said, "Could you wait a minute?" Here, the answers are even harsher.

To the one man who wanted to follow wherever Jesus went, Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lie down and rest." To the man who tells Jesus that he will follow as soon as he has buried his father, Jesus says, "Let the dead bury their own dead. You go and proclaim the kingdom of God." And the third man who asks to say farewell to those he will leave at home, Jesus says, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

We have three cases where it does not look good for the hesitant. Excuses will not make it when the call of Jesus sounds. And we are stuck with the same attitude that we found in the Samaritan village. They all keep saying, "Ya can't make me." It is absolutely true. You cannot make someone love the Lord, or respond to God, or live a life of faith. It is something the individual has to decide. There has to be something within a person that recognizes the need for Jesus Christ in one's life before one can welcome him into one's village or home or heart. And being conditional about it, saying, "I'm ready but not just yet," will not create a situation of conditional salvation. It's a little like putting faith on layaway. It just is not the same as having the item in your possession.

We can put the obstacles in our own way that keep us from following Jesus. We can refuse to let him in because of our fears. We can avoid his presence by saying, "Not yet." We can even prevent a relationship from developing because we aren't ready to put away the past to deal with the future. Whatever the reason, the responsibility lies within our control. What we need to remember is that when we are ready, Jesus is there for us to discover. He didn't destroy the Samaritan village because they refused to let him enter. He didn't forever ban those who had excuses when he called them. The door is always there. All we need to do is go inside to discover the power and the grace of the one who has shown his love for us.