

Grads & Dads
June 18, 2023

As I planned this week's sermon, I thought I'd start off focusing on our high school seniors and their families; listing out the "No's" they should say as they begin their college career, as they begin their adult life, as they begin their independence.

NO to skipping class.

NO to binge drinking.

NO to TikTok challenges.

NO to posting or writing or doing anything online that will come back to haunt you when you apply for your dream job in 5 years AND when your kids find that online stuff in 20 years.

NO to a roommate, teammate, classmate who pressures you into anything you know full well you don't want your parents to hear about.

I was thinking of giving each grad a T-shirt with the single word "No" emblazoned on the front. That was inspired by a magnificent movie from Chile, simply titled "No." It was a true story that took place when General Pinochet was the bloody dictator ruling Chile after a coup. As he stretched his years of despotic rule, he decides to hold a plebiscite – a referendum on whether he should stay in power; and given his authoritarian ways he was sure to win.

But the opposition hired an advertising agency to come up with a campaign to defeat the dictator. The campaign was very simple, very direct, very memorable. Entirely based on the word "No." Billboards, music video, flyers, graffiti, all declaring "No."

So that “No” word seemed perfect for our 17- and 18-year-olds headed off to college and freedom and temptation. Makes me sound like a fun guy, doesn’t it! Christianity already has a bad reputation for being a “no fun” religion, and I get that. The most famous list in the Bible is The Ten Commandments – a whole bunch of “Thou Shalt Nots.” That list is actually reasonable, we probably agree with most of it. But as time wore on, Christians kept expanding the list. I remember going into church in Albany, New York, the walls of the church were covered with dozens of handwritten “Thou Shalt Not” rules, forbidding dancing, lipstick, skirts above the knee, even “Thou shalt not have life insurance.”

Our Southern Baptist colleagues in Christianity just recommitted to “Thou shalt not have Alida in your pulpit.” Some Christians have a well-earned reputation for negativity. However, by last week, my inclination was to back off my “Dr. No” approach to today.

Then came our grandson’s high school graduation from Ludlowe. Afterward, our extended family gathered for dinner at Arezzo’s on the water in Westport. Every family dinner expects me to ruin it by asking “the Question of the Night.” I do it because at my age you get a pass for annoying everyone!

Tuesday night I outdid myself. Six excellent, provocative questions printed on good paper, and I even provided pens, so they could write down their answers. See, I am a fun guy! As our long dinner unfolded, the questions got answered jovially, seriously, profoundly, wittily.

One question had to do with advice for college and my son, Aaron, said, “Don’t be afraid to say ‘No.’” WOW! That didn’t come from an old grump, like me! That came from my very cool, long-haired, dread-locked, mellow son. “Don’t be afraid to say ‘No.’”

That reminded me, Jesus' whole ministry began with saying "No" three times – right in the Devil's face. That takes gumption, courage, faith in oneself. Later on, Jesus said "No" to avoiding the cross. And "No" to escaping the cross.

And we just heard today's scripture, Psalm 1, three verses that I use at every funeral for a good man, it is actually called "The Psalm of a Good Man," and it is perfect for Father's Day. On Mother's Day we really branch out our ideas of Mothers to honor all those women who have made a lasting impact on our lives. And we do the same with fathers.

The minute I wrote down "Father's Day" on my sermon paper, I was filled with memories of key men in my life without whom there is no David Rowe standing here this morning. I came up with seven right off the bat, only two I am related to: my father and grandfather. Then there's a baseball coach, an English teacher, our Old Testament professor, a Theology professor, and a Catholic priest in Prague. You don't need their stories today, I'll only say, they were there at the right time for me, in the right way. But note these verses from the "Psalm of a Good Man," they also begin with three "No's."

"Blessed is the man who does NOT walk with the wicked, does NOT stand around with sinners, does NOT sit among mockers."

Three "NOTs."

Three "don't do this": don't be with negative, hurtful, sarcastic people; don't hang with headed-in-the-wrong-direction-and-want-to-take-you-down-with-them" kind of people.

Just Don't!

But there's another side to "No," isn't there? It's called 'YES!'

Yes, college is a place for new people, new ideas, new freedom. Some good, some close to great. Some bad, some close to evil. The key, for everyone having church with us today, Dads and Grads, and all the rest of us, the key is knowing when to say “Yes,” when to say “No.”

Despite the negative “Thou shalt not” reputation of Christianity, most Christianity is positivity, it’s about saying “Yes.” St. Paul’s list, like the “fruits of the spirit,” is all positive, all good. Jesus’ “Beatitudes” about true happiness; his bottom-line “Two Great Commandments,” about Love; just about everything out of his mouth is a “do this and you’ll be glad you did!”

Indeed, Jesus spent most of his time turning negatives into positives. He talked about being merciful, humble, forgiving, going the extra mile, as being good things.

I was fascinated by an article this week, about “wholesomeness.” Now when I think about “wholesomeness” I think about a Gregory Peck movie, a macaroni and cheese dinner, doo-wop music, real homemade lemonade, and the Memorial Day Parade. So, I wasn’t expecting an article headlined: “To Generation Z, the World Needs ‘Wholesome’”, subtitled “The Word ‘Wholesome’ has come to embody everything pure, true and positive” (May 18, 2023, NY Times, by Sabida Hasan, p.D2)

Generation Z is today’s young people, our kids and grandkids, today’s grads, and the people they’ll be with in college. Just to give you a sense of the article, I’ll pluck a few quotes. Here goes, and I quote:

“They prefer wholesome content, wholesome people, wholesome pastimes...It is a generational value...valuing optimism and contributing to social change...bringing a positive

attitude to (the workplace) ...a positive outlook on life... (less interested in) dark humor, doused in irony, heavy-handed, satire, making fun of others.”

This may surprise you, because mass media portrays the worst among us, especially young people. Whatever, or whoever, is most outrageous, or disturbing, they get the headline. But it’s not surprising to Alida or me who spend a lot of time with Generation Z. It’s not surprising if you’ve hosted a team party or gone to a school concert, or watched, as I did this week, scores of kids outside of Al DiGuido’s “Saugatuck Sweets” lined up for ice cream and candy; or came to our church for another Boy Scout Eagle Award ceremony, or just sit and have a conversation with a teenager. Try it. These are good people. Yes, “wholesome.”

Now, I’m old enough, jaded enough, 1960’s enough to think “wholesome” is the kiss of death. Too bland. Too old-fashioned. And yet...and yet, more people crave it than might admit it. And according to the article, this trend isn’t moralistic, or judgmental; it’s an approach to life without a sharp edge. Not everything in life needs to be a blood-sport laced with F-bombs. It can be really good to walk through a field of flowers; enjoy a jazz concert by the Gazebo downtown; buy a brownie and a cool drink at a kid’s roadside lemonade stand; watch the fireworks on July 4; or, to sue the example in the article, play tic-tac-toe on a foggy window with a friend. Or “Wordle.”

Wholesome, why not?

Like I said before, religion gets a bad rap as being against everything, no, no, no, no, no, “bad boy,” “bad girl,” don’t do this or that or the other.

I reject that, I don't think it's even true. Even most of the prohibitions in the Bible are meant for good. "Thou shalt not kill" is not meant to take your fun away. It's meant to keep the would-be victim alive, and the would-be killer out of jail. It's a "win-win" for everybody.

And positive verses in the Bible? Too sweet? Too nice? Too boring? Oh sure. Like kindness. Boring...until someone's kind to you. Grace?...really boring until you get a second chance you don't deserve. Praying for the sick? Totally boring, unless you are the sick person being prayed for, or someone dear to you.

Here...I'll bore you to death with these final verses for today, some 100% boring advice for Grads and Dads. St. Paul wrote "Finally, whatsoever things are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, of good report – if there be any virtue in these, any praise, think on these things."
(Philippians 4:8)

If you dozed off as I read that list out of sheer boredom, then think about the world in which we live. In fact, I'll make a challenge. Do four things for me this week:

Read the Wall Street Journal, cover to cover, just one day.

Read the New York Times, front to back.

Listen to NBC Nightly News, 6:30pm-7pm, just one night.

Listen to Fox News, one show, one night.

Then tell me how boring and irrelevant St. Paul's list is, all those "whatsoever's," the idea of things that are "true, honest, just, pure, lovely, and of good report," which means "well thought of," a good reputation. You do those four things or any two of those things, and you'll

be screaming for the boredom of wholesomeness. You'll be demanding, heck, even voting for "whatsoever, whoever is true, honest, just, pure, lovely and of good report."

So, Dads, for all the ways you emulate that; for Grads, for all the ways you aim for that:

We thank God for you.

We're proud of you,

We count on you.

At Ludlowe graduation, the Valedictorian was also their superstar softball player who led her team to this year's State Championship. In a rather brilliant speech, she talked of the pressures of this softball season. They had come oh-so-close to winning it all the last two years; she was the star, the leader; great expectations for them and her. But as the season got going, she wasn't happy or successful. She was frustrated and upset. Until one day she slowed down, took stock, remembered what's important and re-found the joy. Joy.

You know, one of those boring, wholesome virtues: Joy.

Not ecstasy.

Not awesomeness.

Not some "wow factor."

None of that over-the-top exuberance that is often selfish. Just joy. The joy of being with friends. The joy of playing a game, like it's a game. The joy of giving your best.

To Grads, take that joy to college.

To Dads, thanks for bringing that joy to our lives.

Addendum

To Gen Z, the World Needs 'Wholesome'

The word has come to embody everything pure, true, and positive.

By: Sadiba Hasan (May 18, 2023, New York Times, p. D2)

When Celeste Scott sees “things that are unscathed by the bad things in the world,” she says she can’t help but blurt out: “That’s so wholesome.”

Examples: Two people on opposite sides of a foggy window playing tic-tac-toe with their fingers. A monkey riding on a piglet’s back. And Pedro Pascal.

It’s a Gen Z compliment, used to describe anything that is sincere, nice or cute, and, according to Ms. Scott, 26, it evokes a specific reaction. “People are like, ‘Aww,’” she said.

What’s not wholesome? “Love Is Blind.” “When I watch that, my heart rate is up. I’m annoyed at the contestants because they’re being dumb,” Ms. Scott said.

Wholesome Memes has three million followers on Twitter. Wholesome Games has 328,000 followers on TikTok. Data from Google Trends shows that “wholesome” started getting popular in 2018 and peaked in September 2020.

Enzo Luna, a 22-year-old communications consultant, recalls first using “wholesome” in everyday language around 2019. “I think it caught on a lot because it’s just a word that sounds cool,” he said. “It’s such a strong and simple word.”

Ms. Scott was working for a lifestyle blog called The Good Trade in 2019 when she called their content “wholesome” during a meeting. But her co-workers thought she meant it in a negative way — that their work was lame or uncool. Once they learned that it was a compliment, they started using the word themselves. One co-worker even wrote a think piece about the word.

“Maybe before, ‘wholesome’ was used to describe something a little more conservative,” theorized Ms. Scott, who was the blog’s youngest employee.

The Gen Z compliment is free of connotations of traditional family values and virtues, according to Michèle Lamont, a sociology professor at Harvard and the author of a forthcoming book titled “Seeing Others: How Recognition Works and How It Can Heal a Divided World.”

“They’re not necessarily defining ‘wholesome’ the way the Midwesterners traditionally do, but more in the sense of having a positive outlook on life,” Dr. Lamont said.

Mr. Luna thinks of wholesomeness as kindness, like giving up a seat for an elder or complimenting a stranger.

So does Sufian Miah, 16. “I saw a video of a person talking to a homeless man, and they became good friends after a while. It was wholesome,” he said. “It means a good feeling in the heart for everyone who witnessed it and was a part of it.”

Wholesome Games, a TikTok and Twitter account that posts video snippets of cozy games, has a mostly Gen Z audience: 67 percent of its audience on TikTok is between 18 and 24. (TikTok does not show the founder of the page, Matthew Taylor, data for users younger than 18.)

There are also oodles of wholesome meme accounts, which Gen Z prefers over the satirical millennial memes of the early 2010s that were coated with dark humor and doused in irony.

“Sometimes those ironic and satirical memes are too heavy-handed, and they go into things that, at a certain point, it’s not really a joke anymore,” Mr. Luna said. He said he appreciated wholesome content instead. Watching cat videos is one of his favorite pastimes. “I really enjoy seeing that type of content as opposed to people making fun of others,” he said.

And it’s not just wholesome content that Gen Z-ers prefer. Many of them prefer wholesome people, like Harry Styles; wholesome pastimes, like playing board games; and a wholesome lifestyle consisting of “healing eras” and “protecting your peace.” Wholesomeness is not just a compliment, then. It’s a generational value.

In a 2022 study, Dr. Lamont worked with two students, Shira Zilberstein and Mari Sanchez, who interviewed 80 college undergraduates and found that there was an overall sentiment among Gen Z of valuing optimism and contributing to social change.

“This is the cohort that came of age under Covid, the first people born with a phone in their hands,” Dr. Lamont said. She said the focus on positivity was a way to move forward from the hardships.

Mr. Luna recently entered the work force and started his role at Harbor Freight Tools for Schools in June 2022. He said he had noticed that his co-workers “expect the world to be hard on them.” But he preferred to be “the person who tries to be a place of comfort for everybody, regardless of all the other difficulties that the world presses on you.”

Emily Torres, 33, has noticed that her Gen Z co-workers tend to bring a positive attitude into meetings. She is an editorial director at The Good Trade, and Ms. Scott was once her co-worker.

“I’m having some fun memories of my colleague,” she said of Ms. Scott. “Because she was wholesome.”