

Can You Say “Uh-Huh” to Jesus?

Matthew 5:21-37

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Unbeknownst to most human developmental psychologists, speech therapists, or philosophers of language, one of the most complex, and often used, gestures in modern American culture is the generic “uh-huh.” Supposedly, the “uh-huh” means that one is in agreement, or gratified with, something or someone else. It is a gesture that is arguably one of the first gestures learned in life, and used often thereafter. For example, there are the times that the members of my family would use the “uh-huh” on my grandmother, who loved to talk, especially while *we* were reading something and she wasn’t reading. Grandma would just start on a roll of babbling, and the family member would hide behind the newspaper, giving an “uh-huh,” by which she thought you were interested in what she was saying, and so on she would continue, for an hour or more at a sprint.

Students, from grade school to graduate school, also know the trick of the “uh-huh,” as do their teachers, and we practice it upon one another daily. Call it a habit. What makes it complex is that the “uh-huh” has a facial partner that is *in* agreement with the “uh-huh,” is in sharp *dis*agreement with the vocal “uh-huh,” or the person is merely taking information in, or drowning in it, not having a clue where he or she stands, feels, or thinks about an issue being discussed. It is a wonderfully ambiguous gesture, allowing one to live in the space called “ambivalence,” sometimes for one’s entire education, free from ever having to take a stand or have any convictions about anything. Education without engagement!

Secretly, that is the hope of those who practice the ambiguous “uh-huh,” that they may rest comfortably and blissfully in the land called “Ambivalence.” It is a place where there is no need to make a commitment to anything, and where there are no convictions of faith for that might make people unhappy. For some it is a utopian “pie in the sky” land, where we may be free from being accountable to anyone, and are not responsible for any of our actions. This is a land in which you may always return what you bought, whether you wore it or not, no questions asked. This is the place in which you sincerely believe you can renege on a signed contract, with no penalty whatsoever. This is a place where your word, your oath, means nothing; handshakes-as-agreements are merely pudgy flesh upon slimy flesh; and an affirmation of faith doesn’t mean that you *really* believe in the “Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, and life everlasting.” Instead, these are just words that any ol’ fool can speak, with no strings attached; and the people of God said “Uh-huh.”

Clearly, Jesus was speaking to the “any ol’ fools” in the land of “Ambivalence” who thought that their words mean nothing. For in Jesus, we meet no language of ambiguity, and he displaces our quieting notion that we who follow him can dwell in the land of ambivalence. For to speak or gesture a word, we are doing something, *even* if we say “Uh-huh.” We oblige ourselves to another person, putting our words, our lives, on record for all to see and hear as our words impact themselves upon the very real, very present lives of others. So powerful are the words we speak, and strong are

the bonds the words create, that we do not need to add upon them unnecessary oaths, bringing in and swearing by heaven, by the throne of God, by earth, God's footstool, by Jerusalem, or even by Duke University. Instead, Jesus instructs us by telling us that we should "let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No;' anything more than this comes from the evil one."

For Jesus, to *say* something is to *do* something. For example, in the reading this day from the Gospel according to St. Matthew (Matt. 5:21-37), Jesus says that we are liable to judgment if we speak insulting words to a brother or sister. If we say the words, "you fool," then we would be liable to the hell of fire. Perhaps you remember that your brother or sister in Christ has something against you. Then you are to leave the gift at the altar, reconcile with the other person, then come on back and offer the gift. Simply put, by our words-as-actions, we may create enemies and strife in community that is as bitter as bile; yet by words-as-actions we may bring forth the overwhelming honeyed sweetness of reconciliation among one another, restoring a friendship once broken by angry words.

Or consider that at a wedding, when one says "Yes, I do" in the vows, one is saying "I am indulging in it," "I am promising and obliging myself, putting myself on record, the spiritual assumptions of marriage."¹ It is because these very words were spoken that two people become one in Christ. It is the bond of marriage in Christ that reveals the larger narrative by which we can even comprehend the sin of adultery, or the painful, tearing failure of a marriage in divorce. For in divorce, the marriage that was first created by the spoken word is irrevocably torn asunder by words as well, like "I am leaving you."

Good friendships broken by angry words; marriages uprooted by even speaking the word "divorce" are the most searing, painful parts of being in Christian community. For such anger, such brokenness points to our inability, or lack of will, in wanting to follow Jesus' practice of love. By our words, such actions and conditions indict us in the court of God's love. There is no ambiguity or ambivalence about it. The once beautifully crafted crystal gift of friendship, of marriage, is shattered into razor thin shards, cutting all those who attempt to clean up the remnant. Furthermore, if our yes be yes, and our no be no, we must confess that, yes, we, the community of Christ stood numbly by as our friends vented words of bloody anger upon one another without offering counsel. And no, we the "congregation" who stood and witnessed the couple making their vows of marriage in the wedding ceremony, failed to support the couple in their most angst-driven moments. No words can cover up the mess that we, the community of Christ, have made of life. The naive "uh-huh" of ambiguity dare not be uttered, for the hell of fire is hot enough as it is.

Children of God, followers of Jesus, thanks be to God that we are not alone, even in, or especially amid, the brokenness of human life. For we are but the most recent beneficiaries, because of the Word of God, Jesus Christ, of unmerited grace upon grace. Writes Annie Dillard, "grace is handed to us, but only if we look for it. We search, we break our heart, our back, our brain, and then — and only then — it is handed to us. From the corner of our eye we see motion. Something is moving through the air and headed our way. It is a parcel bound in ribbons and bows; it has two white wings. It flies directly at us; we can read our name on it. If it were a baseball, we would hit it out of the park. It is that one pitch in a thousand we see in slow motion; its wings beat slowly as a hawk's."²

Grace, enraptured in the violence of human relationships, rips away our breath, leaving us gasping for air. Grace is discovered in the words of what we call the Lord's prayer, when we dare to utter, with no ambivalence, the words of forgiveness for our trespasses, our sins, our debts, as we forgive those who trespass, who sin, who hold debts, against us. Grace is found in the unambiguous words written in the Apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, where we recognize anew that it is precisely *because* we are God's servants that we are to work together. We are God's field, God's building, all of us, not by our doing, but by God's creation. For in the Word becoming living flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, a grace-filled gesture, we catch a glimpse into the wondrous mystery that we live in a Spirit-led community of love. It is a truth that we memorized once, forgot easily, but now remember in ways that startle us awake to the living God.

One cannot say the ambivalent "uh-huh" to Jesus, for there is no ambiguity to Jesus' invitation to his table, to this eucharistic meal of divine reconciliation. Our Savior invites us, by name, all those who trust him, to share in this holy banquet feast. And we cannot be ambivalent in our response to the holy invitation extended to all who love him. As we awake to the dawning of a new heaven and a new earth in Jesus Christ, when the dazzling light breaks over the horizon of time, let us toss off our lazy, noncommittal, slouching "uh-huh" of ambiguity, for it is time to commit ourselves in breaking our necks, in joyous abandon, out of the land of "Ambivalence," for our glorious home in Jesus Christ.

Notes

¹ J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 12-13

² Annie Dillard, "The Writing Life" in *Three By Dillard* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 595