## Sheldon W. Sorge, December 27, 2016

## Yes and No: A Meditation in Memory of Lana Dumrauf

Matthew 5:33-37

"Again, you have heard that the people in the old days were told—'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord', but I say to you, don't use an oath at all. Don't swear by Heaven for it is God's throne, nor by the earth for it is his footstool, nor by Jerusalem for it is the city of the great king. No, and don't swear by your own head, for you cannot make a single hair—white or black! Whatever you have to say let your 'yes' be a plain 'yes' and your 'no' a plain 'no'—anything more than this has a taint of evil." (J.B. Phillips)

I have never given a talk or sermon based on this text. But if you know Lana, you can already appreciate why I selected it for her service. It shows up once in the three-year preaching lectionary as part of the larger surrounding passage, and most lectionary commentaries brush over it quickly, giving more attention to the adjacent sayings in which Jesus teaches that lust is equivalent to adultery, and hatred to murder. But when I thought about a Bible text that would be appropriate for a service honoring Lana, I was drawn to this little gem, one in a series of jewels in which Jesus contrasts external religious law-keeping with the more important matters of the heart.

Even though most commentators pay more attention to the other segments in this string of sayings by Jesus, "You have heard it said... but I say to you...," this is the only one of the series to be later repeated by Paul and by James in their epistles. Speaking honestly mattered a great deal to the early church, and it should to us as well.

The text isn't condemning "swearing" in the four-letter-word sense. It's not about being polite in our talk. In fact, "polite talk" is one of the things Jesus wants us to abandon. He's not promoting crudeness, but he has no use for people shading the truth in order to put themselves in a good light, or to gain a desired outcome, or to make others feel good. I am reminded of my wife's friend Lesa who had recently emigrated from Australia, and went to the supermarket in the North Carolina town where we lived at the time. As she moved toward the exit with her bags in hand, the cashier called out, "Y'all come back now!" At which Lesa stopped, returned to the checkout, and the puzzled cashier asked, "May I help you?" Lesa replied, "You asked me to come back." She had to learn that in North Carolina "Y'all come back" is a polite thing to say, but people rarely mean it.

For Jesus, saying what you mean and meaning what you say matters greatly. Our text is part of what we call Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, in which he describes the nature of the kingdom of heaven. In that kingdom, people don't have to swear to the truth, because they always tell the truth. They don't have to sign their ordination vows, they simply fulfill them. They don't have to say things like, "I promise," or "Believe me," or "Scout's honor," or "I swear on my mother's grave." In fact, saying such things only makes us more prone to shading or twisting or betraying the truth in everyday conversation.

Lana is the poster child for this way of living. She told it like it is, and expected us to do the same. Nothing irritated her more at work than people or congregations failing to provide us information or to show up at meetings despite having promised to do so when they became part of our presbytery.

With Lana, there was never any mystery about what she was feeling. One of the commentators on this text notes that Jesus is advocating for telling the "unvarnished truth." This was Lana – a person who told the unvarnished truth. When she came to my office, I knew immediately what she wanted to say, because she got right to the point. Her eyes and her tongue were open books. She didn't know the meaning of the term "pussy-footing" – except, perhaps, as something she despised in others. Be direct, for goodness sake! Yes, for the sake of true goodness! Friends, Lana was the real deal in the "goodness" department. Believe me! (Oh, wait, did I just say, "Believe me"??)

Some people didn't know just how kind Lana's heart really was. She was too kind to speak dishonestly or condescendingly or deferentially. Her greatest visible expression of kindness was her loyalty – loyalty to the truth, and loyalty to others. To Mike. To friends and family. To the Penguins. To our presbytery – forty-two years working for our community of congregations, despite all of our own disloyalties, for goodness' sake! She was one of the brightest, most dependable, hard-working people I have known – she could have easily landed other higher-paying jobs. But she was loyal to presbytery, because of her deeper loyalty to the church she joined with her profession of faith in Jesus as her Lord and Savior, to whom she stayed loyal without parading an ounce of external religiosity. Every week she was with us as our staff gathered to worship God, read and discuss Scripture, and pray for one another, for our presbytery, and for our world. As it is for me, so it was for Lana – our staff's weekly worship gathering is our home congregation.

I suggested having this service at the presbytery office, but it is too small, and Lana was glad to have her service here at Northmont, where she had worshiped many times. In fact, the whole presbytery was her home church – she could have had this service at any of our 140 congregations, and it would genuinely be at her church.

Lana was always straight with me – and she expected me to be the same with her. Tell it straight, she challenged me. And I am a better person for it. She taught me something that I seek to practice regularly with others who may prefer at first that I didn't tell it straight. I learned from Lana that in the end, telling the unvarnished truth is far kinder than telling people only what they want to hear. Lana lived by what Jesus taught in today's text. In God's kingdom, Yes means Yes, and No means No.

Sometimes we like to imagine what a departed loved one must be doing on the other side of the pearly gates. For Lana, I can see her helping Peter get caught up on the rolls that must be very hard to keep up with. She'll find a way. I also see her reminding those who approach the pearly gates, "For heaven's sake, don't start making excuses for your earthly mistakes – heaven

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doesn't want to hear your excuses any more than people did down below."

Making excuses just makes matters worse for us. It sure did us no good with Lana if we tried to make excuses for failing to file a report properly, or for missing a meeting without advance notice. Jesus is praising "Yes, yes," or "No, no" – never "Yes, but," or "No, but." We don't need to make excuses to Jesus, because he receives us not on account of what we have done or failed to do, but on account of who he is. He is none other than God, the all-merciful, in human flesh.

As her days came to their close, Lana missed her work and her circle of friends greatly. She hated being limited by the cancer and its treatment. She pushed against it with every ounce of her formidable strength. When the doctor first diagnosed her cancer, he thought she might have a few short months to live – she pressed on for nearly two more years. She kept working at our office through constant chemo treatments for more than fifteen months. Yes, she resisted death for as long she could possibly manage. But when it came time finally to yield, she was at peace. We were laughing together just a couple of days before she drew her final breath. We spoke about today's events openly and honestly – surprise, surprise. She was ready to finish her journey, knowing that the Lord whom she had served all these years was equally ready to receive her into his arms of mercy and grace.

Heaven is probably in better order today than it was a week ago. Not so with us – unless we take to heart and commit ourselves to being Jesus' followers in the way Lana was. Are we ready to be people whose Yes means Yes and No means No? This is the way of the kingdom. It is the Jesus way. It is Lana's way. May it be ours as well.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.