

“The Practice of Saying No”

“Here is the world; beautiful and terrible things will happen.

Be not afraid.

Because this is what we are about:

We hold hope for each other when hope is hard to find.

We plant seeds that will one day grow.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

We cannot do everything,

But we can do something.

So forget your perfect offering.

There is a crack in everything.

That is how the light gets in.”

Please join me in letting these words sink into us this morning,

These words from preacher Frederick Buechner, Bishop Oscar Romero, and

Song-poet Leonard Cohen,

Words that I will open my sermons with this year until I get tired of them,

or you do, or both.

So a question to start our sermon together,

We of damaged by presidential election cycle ears,

And thirsty for some good word that doesn't have to do with deflated

footballs ears,

And ears that have maybe had, depending on the ages in your household,

Too much Taylor Swift songs all summer, or NPR,

Or kids in your ear whispering: *what can I have for snack?*

or more loudly: *“I’m boooored....”*

And ears that on any given day take in so many blips, beeps, buzzes,
Voices, voicemails, tweets, fights, fads, ads, songs, clangs,
Commercials, barks, burps, meows, mowers and the dreaded
Whine.....

That sometimes all we want most is this.....(silence).

Can you hear it?

The question being this, out of the silent stillness:

What did you have to say ‘no’ to this morning in order

To leave time to sit here.....?

Or in other words: what did you have to choose not to do so

That you could be here now.....?

(listen to examples here)

Well, wow. We should be probably thank each other,

Because if you didn’t say “no” then no one would be here, right?

Yeah, thank you.

Not for nothing do I remind us until we roll our eyes:

Don’t come to this church for yourself. Oh No.

Come for someone else.

Because in an age of seflies and selfie-sticks and

“look at my face...book”

Attendance here is a counter-cultural act of service, ok?

And what is it that we say every Sunday? *Love is the Spirit*

Of our church, and service is our LAW.

So never mind if you’re not sure if you’re really a ‘churchy person,’

Or if you find yourself getting twisted up in intellectual knots
 At words like *religion or God or Jesus or prayer*.
 You're among friends. You have lots of company.
 Being a religious person is much less about what you think
 you believe,
 And much more about the kind of person you are.

And who knows...maybe that's sermon enough.
 It's basically what I preach all the time - just so you know –
 that religion isn't about lovely sanctuaries and robed
 preachers and choirs, all beautiful, but instead
 about getting off the treadmill of self, of the stair master '*me.*'
 If we don't help you do that, then as someone whose been driving
 Me crazy all summer would have said on his reality TV show,
 You can say:
 "*You're fired!*"

But here's what I want to think about with you:
 I want to think about the word 'yes' and the word 'no.'
 One of my favorite ministers, BBT, now retired because she
 Could no longer stand the irony of being thought of a professional
 Holy person,
 Writes of the book from the early 1980's that ever since
 Has consistently been on one bestseller list or another...
 The book entitled: "*Getting to Yes*" about negotiating practices.
 Hands up who have read it?
 Barbara says that the title appealed to her enough to buy it,

Even though she *never* read it,
 Because *getting to yes* was such a positive concept that just seeing
 It on the bookshelf cheered up everyone who saw it.
 “Yes,” she says, *is capable of changing a life through the utterance of a
 single syllable:*

Yes, I will go to homecoming dance with you! (recently carved into sand at
 Winthrop Lake beach)

Yes, you made the soccer team!

Yes, you got the job!

Yes, the scan for cancer is clear!

Yes, your baby is healthy!

Yes, (says the Supreme Court), you can get married!

Yes, (said oh-so-few EU countries), you can cross our border!

Yes is such a powerful word because it means, says BBT, someone wants
 us,

Something approves of us, we are welcome, honored, accepted, encouraged.

Yes is positive, forward-thinking, glass-half-full.

Yes, we like to think, is oh-so-American.

Yes, we can do that!

Yes, I can run that marathon!

Yes, I can pedal across the Pyrenees,

Yes, I can take on one more client!

Yes, I can drive one more carpool!

Yes, I can work this weekend!

Yes, I mean, I hope, someone else will figure out this climate-change thing.

Meanwhile, life goes on.

*Yes, just keep on keeping on, doing more, getting more, producing more,
Using more, being more, saving the world more, yes, yes, yes....!*

For all these reasons and more, says BBT, there aren't many
Advocates for the practice of saying *No*.

We when we can't do anymore,

When we drop the ball,

When we stand in the mirror, all private,

And whisper that we can't really put in the happy, smiley face today,

And try to be everyone's friend,

When we just want to stay home,

Stay quiet, stop pretending to be an extrovert,

Say no to the Big Promotion because of the extra hours,

We maybe feel like a failure, we feel the secret pain.

What's wrong with me? Why can't I just get to yes?

Sound familiar?

It should. The darkness of NO is not pretend.

No, you cannot cross the border here.

No, we will not fund Planned Parenthood.

No, I will not sign your marriage license.

No, I won't dance with you.

No, you did not get the job.

No, you haven't been accepted to our school.

No, you aren't forgiven. No, I don't love you anymore.

Who knew such hurt could be held in two letters?

And yet, and yet.

We need to know what we can say *yes* to. And what we cannot.

After my younger brother's death five weeks ago,

Do you know what one of the most frequent questions I got

From family and friends was?

Nathan, Rev. Nathan, do you think you can lead the funeral service?

Which was understandable.

Out of a long line of educators and Anheiser-Busch employees,

I was the only minister. Never mind that I wasn't Catholic anymore.

I was the professional. I knew what to do.

And it would make things easier.

And I'm sure it would have made my parents feel just a little bit better,

The way it did when I led the same brother's wedding seven years ago.

Which is yet another reminder of how *Yes* can be so seductive.

Yes gives others what they think they want.

Yes is the favorite word of the people-pleaser;

Yes is the fall-back word of the person who feels better about themselves

because their ego is caught up in what others think of them.

Nathan, can you do the funeral service?

No, I'm so sorry, but no. The clarity I felt surprised me.

Oh, ok. Why?

Because I think that if I try to be the minister I can't be the brother.

Oh, I never thought of that.

Yeah, me neither.

I'm sorry we asked.

No, I get it. I understand. Because in my head I'm thinking:

I would have asked. I mean – I'm supposed to come in here,
Older sibling, and make things better, right?

I'm the minister. Loss and death is part of my job. I've got the books,
The degree. Good grief, I even have the outfit!

Yes?

No. Not this time.

This time I needed to listen instead of preach,

Receive instead of give,

Sit instead of stand,

Be instead of do,

Comforted instead of comforter.

No instead of yes.

And who knew?

Even someone with *type A* tendencies like me
can learn to let go, and let someone else take care....

which offers some small redemption in the face of
such tender, terrible pain.

Which is why I tell my story, to invite you in this season

Of September Yes's and abundance and busyness and production

And supposedly proving your worth...

To ask yourself what most needs your NO these days,

So that you can say YES to the important work
you might otherwise miss.

No, new job.

No, extra evening class.

No, church volunteer request for something I hate doing.

No going to the Mall; it's Sunday morning!

No, you can't come home until you go to AA with me.

No, I won't be pretend like everything is fine.

Yes, time with the people I love!

Yes, coaching gig for my daughter's team!

Yes, sign me up for something that allows me to use my gifts!

Yes, let's go sit in an uncomfortable pew. Why? Because

Someone else might need us next to them.

Yes, I love you enough to tell you the truth about what I see

You doing to yourself.

Yes, I love you as you are, but I love you too much to let you stay there.

Yes, the world goes on marvelously spinning on its axis without my worry.

Yes, I am more than what I produce.

Yes, I can rest.

Yes, I can say NO.

