

A Church That Says Yes
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reading: the story of Narcissus from Greek Mythology

credit to colleague the Reverend Chip Roush for the phrase, "The Yes Church"

sermon

What misery, to be in love with one's own reflection!

We began this morning with the story of narcissus: a story of self-obsession, of surprise, of delight, and of tragedy. It is written out of fear, fear of a kind of self-absorption and ignorance that can lead to downfall.

The story, passed down through millennia from ancient Greece, imbues us with a kind of paranoia of mirrors, a fear of looking too much, or liking what we see more than we should. It implies that it is possible to like yourself so much that you lose track of your responsibilities, your commitments, your context. It implies that appreciating one's own merits can be irresponsible, damaging, or even destructive.

Certainly, it can be.

The trouble is, mirrors are not just for vanity--they are not just for insignificant issues that are important only to us. Mirrors give us that rare gift of vision through another's eyes; for a brief moment or two we can "see oursel' as ithers see us", as poet Robbie Bairns so gracefully put it. It's a rare privilege to have that outside perspective, an honest critique that leans neither to the indulgent nor to the cruel, motivated by something more robust than whim. When someone offers us that gift--whether by donation, suggestion, comment, or offer--we are wise to accept, and to accept with grace, not suspicion, not anger, not fear.

It is okay to look, and to like what we see.

It is okay to look and see something we need to change.

It is important to look, to know ourselves, our assets, our flaws, else how can we know our role in the world?

"Know thyself," said the temple at Delphi. It is a noble ideal.

So who are we?

We are a church that says yes.

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We are, in fact, so much a church that says yes that I have found it prudent to preach on how to say no. There is perhaps a slight inclination here to yes-that-means-no, and injudicious yeses are not a strategy for survival or for good communication. But yes as a default beginning has merits. A life of heartfelt yeses is brilliant and strong and undergirded with joy. As songwriter Carrie Newcomer sings, "It's not the things I've gone and done I'll regret and be ashamed/but the things I did not say or do just because I was afraid."

One has fear. One always has fear. The question is only what we do with it.

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Anthony Bourdain, host of TV's No Reservations, has a gene for the unexpected, a craving for the unlikely. He has made a second career out of eating anything, anywhere, so those of us with less adventurous palates and less expansive travel budgets can go along for the ride. He rides the wave of adrenaline and fear and then he writes about it.

In A Cook's Tour he adds some backstory, retracing a worldwide tour of meals and filling in the bits about missing ingredients, sick stomachs, and unlikely travel. This is not writing for the faint of heart; the graphic details should turn any reasonable, sheltered, Westernized stomach. Somehow, though, it is possible to emerge from reading about roasted sheep testicles and pan-fried birds not just peckish but ravenous, ready to take on the entire Asian continent in one giant gulp.

This is a man who appears unable to say "no", but he is a chef, a good chef, a New York chef, which means that "no" is second only to his knives in his toolkit. He does not say "okay" because he has no other choice. He says "yes" because he loves it. Certainly, one could make the case that the money is an excellent motivator. But one would be unduly. His is the yes of a man with too much living to fit into too few days. We should all be so lucky.

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And in this congregation, we are already saying yes, all over the place. We say yes when we support causes of our hearts. We say yes when we pursue accessibility. We say yes when we understand ourselves as responsible and as authoritative, when we know we make a difference and are called to action.

We say yes when we welcome wisdom from all sides.

We say yes when we believe in people.

We say yes when we sing the hymns even when we don't agree with the lyrics, not only because it is the right thing but because we know there may well be wisdom just after that terrible word in the third stanza.

Being a yes church means that we put trust in our worship leaders, even when the service structure is unfamiliar, because we know that something good will come of it.

it means we come back when we have been hurt, because we believe in redemption and in second chances.

it means church is as much about showing up as it is about getting something. It means we come to church because we come to church, it means we know we cannot know what impact we might have in someone else's life, or what might happen to transform our world when we get here.

it means we hang in there when people are having a hard time—even if they are having a hard time with each other. It means we know the best of us is flawed and the worst of us are gifted.

it means we say yes to working for causes of our hearts, even when it is hard or expensive or complicated. It means we're willing to put in the work, because we know we matter. We know we make a difference.

And we know it makes a difference.

Because in the end a church cannot be a church unless it says yes. Saying yes makes us active, saying yes makes us a community, saying yes makes us active in our community. It makes us trustworthy; it makes us visionary; it makes us whole.

A church that does not say yes loses heart and spirit and eventually, even its voice,

We must guard against the loss. We guard against the gradual seeping away of what makes us alive by engaging with every inch of our hearts and souls.

A church that does not say yes is just an empty shell, a ghost of what it could be. A church that does not say yes loses its presence in the world--it loses its BE-ing; it stops existing in all but name.

We say yes to being here, to being at all, to speaking about liberal faith in a time of conservative religious power.

It means we reclaim faith-based language, refusing to cede the power of ancient words to limiting definitions and harsh judgments

It means we claim our power--the power to make change by living actively in the world.

This is important. In fact, this is vital.

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My dear partner Janine cannot stand to wash dishes. I am slow about laundry. There's nothing inherently wrong about laundry or dishes, we just have our habits, our preferences, our thresholds. We got lucky though, because I don't mind dishes. She doesn't mind laundry. For the first year that we lived together, we both tried to do everything, because we were in the habit of thinking that we should. We were raised in the wake of second-wave feminism, which taught us that bill paying and snow shoveling and cooking and dishes and laundry were equal-opportunity tasks. Good thing, as it turns out, since at our house we're it. But over time it became clear that she has an aptitude for detail and I have an aptitude for overview. She gets satisfaction out of dotting I's and crossing t's. I just get distracted. Did you know that we can read a word reasonably easily with only the first and last letters in the right place? Apparently it has to do with the way we recognize words as a whole.

Anyway, it took us until this move to realize that we could each do what we found easy. What a lovely realization!

The Dalai Lama has been known to tell people not to convert to Buddhism—but instead to bring whatever they know and whatever they need to their own faith, to their own religion rather than thinking that one is so very different from another. We must be who we are, and be that thing well. As a faith we have a tendency to innovation, with some solid roots in the past. As a congregation, I have discovered the secret: this congregation is good at risk.

yes, risk.

Oh, you try not to tell. You try not to admit it. But this church is composed of daredevils in quiet clothing. I should have known when I heard about building the RE wing, about the leap to full time ministry, about the results of last year's annual stewardship campaign. I should have known when I saw the twinkles in your eyes and heard about the search committee's dramatic presentation of the survey results.

Perhaps I did know. Perhaps I recognized kindred spirits.

When we all play to our strengths, we have more joy and more energy for things that matter to us. Not every congregation in the UUA or in the Ellsworth area is good at saying yes. Not every religious institution has mastered the fine art of enjoying the freefall that comes with persistent acceptance of challenges. Not everyone knows how or even wants to. But this one

has. This one does. This is what this congregation offers to the movement: yes lessons, yes modeling, yes hope. In a faith where we trust above all else leadership by example, this congregation is already poised to lead.

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When cyclists race, there's more than sheer muscle and force of will at work. Like most athletes, they have physics to contend with. For runners and gymnasts and others, the primary forces at work are friction and gravity, each a friend, each a foe. But when you travel at bicycle speeds, the aerodynamics suddenly matter, too. They matter a lot. If a cyclist can get someone else to lead, the savings of energy is between 20 and 30 percent--a huge advantage in a sport where hundredths of a second count. So they do this thing called drafting. Essentially, if one cyclist is following another, the second cyclist rides close behind the first--close enough to fit into a little pocket of low pressure created by the first cyclist's motion through the air.

(<http://www.exploratorium.edu/cycling/aerodynamics2.html>) We can do the same thing in religion, riding each other's coattails to a more effective presence in the world. Ordinarily small churches end up drafting a lot--riding the low-pressure waves behind the large and the powerful. It means we don't always have all the choice we'd like about where we're going or how we get there. We have to work within the parameters available unless our passion drives us so hard that we have an extra 20% of resources to devote to a project.

Sometimes, though, we're good enough, strong enough, or naturally inclined enough to lead the pack. We don't have to wait for someone else to tell us how to go or to break our trail; we can instead lead and make the path easier for someone else.

And right now, in this time of tremendous change, with initiatives for growth and diversity, we are poised. We are ready. We are nimble. Our size makes it easy for us to develop and launch initiatives with relatively short turnaround time. Our curiosity makes us easy to educate. And our willingness to take chances is just what the doctor ordered.

When I was in high school, nearly everyone took some kind of chemistry in 10th grade. You could take honors, or college prep, or you could take fundamental, or even physical science, but everyone took something. And what this meant was that everyone had to learn about moles. I might have forgotten by now, except that I grew up with a chemical engineer father and live with a chemistry teacher. So I still know that a mole is a unit of measure, like a dozen, only much

larger. I still know that it relies on the relatively arbitrary Avagadro's number, which I recall as 6.02×10^{23} . And I still know that therefore a mole is 6.02×10^{23} of anything.

That's a lot of things. I'm told it would make a layer of marbles 50 miles thick that covered the earth; I'm told a mole of moles placed head to tail would make it to Alpha Centauri and back.

The mole is the standard unit of measure in chemistry, and for some reason, it's really hard to learn. Not the number itself, but its proper application and manipulation is hard. Almost impossible.

But my chemistry teacher was smart. He was savvy. He was experienced. And he knew that everyone was capable of learning about moles. As far as he was concerned, we were all capable of learning whatever chemistry he threw our way. So he invented the 90% test.

The 90% test was about moles. It was a regular-length test, meant for a 42 minute class period.

We got no special notes, no special testing aids and no extra time. We had to pass it at 90%.

We got four tries. Same test. Same questions.

And every year, every student did it. Not once (that I know of) in all his years of teaching did someone NOT pass the 90% test. And when we passed, we felt so good. We felt triumphant.

We felt like we could do anything.

If only for a minute.

But it was a good trick, because then he, too, knew we could do it. He knew we could do anything. And after that, if we didn't pass, it wasn't for lack of aptitude.

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Here's my theory: I think the move to full time ministry was your 90% test. It'd been years.

You never quite knew if you could pull it off. But you did. Here we are. It didn't even take you two years to make it happen once you decided to do it.

And now it's public knowledge--this is a church that says yes, and means it. This is a church that says yes.

This is not about what could be. This is not about perhaps, fantasy, might-have-been. This is not, for once, about possibility or potential or some starry-eyed future. This is about who we are.

This is about here. This is about now. This is about commitment and vision and dedication and hard work--and love. A lot about love. This is the story of people who cannot help themselves, people who are in the world-repair business for better or for worse, and are making it better.

Look around right here and you will see healers and counselors, teachers and researchers and farmers and artists and philanthropists. You will see people who make reality from possibility every day. Some do it for pay; some do it on principle alone. This congregation is composed of visionaries and dreamers and activists whose callings are to improve the world by seeing paths where everyone else sees tangled, impassible forest.

This is a place where one hundred or more are gathered, one hundred or more of stout hearts and minds and souls, ready to say yes each week; ready to say yes each day. This is the place our where our spirits come home. How can we do anything but sing? How can we do anything but rejoice? Here, at last, we can say yes *together*. We can sing yes with a resounding voice. Here, we can shout to the skies and be heard. Our many voices sound together and we say yes! We call yes! We know

as we know our own hearts
that we will say together, *yes!*

Blessed be, and amen.