

“Yes, And...”

Introduction of “Yes, And...” Theme

Genesis 1:1-5, 26a, 31; 2:1-2; Matthew 22:34-39; Revelation 21:3-6 (NRSV)

Two words can change your
life:

“I do.”

“You’re fired.”

“You’re pregnant.”

“Not guilty.”

“It’s malignant.”

“You won.”

There are two other words –
simple and rather common –
that when used together, can
not only change *your* life, they
can change the world: “Yes,
and...”

For example, when Rosa Parks
got on the bus she said, “Yes, I
can ride the bus, *and* I can sit in
the front.”

Or when a computer whiz and
his friend said, “Yes, let’s build
an open source encyclopedia
online, *and* let’s make it free
for the world.”

Or when NASA said, “Yes,
let’s send a man into space, *and*
let’s have him walk on the
moon.”

These are examples that
Educational Psychologist and
co-founder of the Florida
Hospital Innovation Lab, Karen
Tilstra, gives in her TEDTalk,
*Two words that can change the
world, YES AND.*¹

She goes on to say that not all
ideas are as big as Rosa Parks
sitting down in the front of a
bus, two computer guys
creating Wikipedia, or Neil
Armstrong taking “*one small
step for man, one giant leap for
mankind.*” But as one who
studies creativity and
innovation, she proposes that
every idea deserves at least one
minute of life. Which is a bold
statement when you consider
how many bad ideas are in the
world...a quick google search
of “bad ideas” reveals 794
million entries! In her research,
Tilstra talks about two of these
so-called “bad ideas”: a cement
parachute and a glass hammer.

¹ Karen Tilstra, “Two Words That Can Change the
World: YES AND,” *Tedx Talks Orlando* (Oct. 30,

2012), accessed on 9 Sept. 2018 at
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11SK_qNLx5U.

Sure a cement parachute is a bad idea if you are jumping out of an airplane and you want to live, but, she says, if you are a hard rock band with a light and airy feel, and you're looking for a good name – Cement Parachute might just be it.

Sure, if you are a contractor building a house, you won't give glass hammers to your workers on demo day...but if you are a woman who just broke through the glass ceiling in your field and you won an award...a glass hammer would be a pretty cool trophy to symbolize your achievement.²

These examples epitomize what it means to have a “Yes, and...” mentality. “Yes, and...” changes our perspective. It allows us to not just dismiss an idea based on our initial reaction to it...but to actually imagine how that idea could be a possibility...or could even expand our minds, our hearts, our lives, our faith.

And *that* is why, we've made “Yes, and...” our guiding theme for this year at Calvary.

So, what is “Yes, And...” anyway? And where did it come from? Well, it's the first and most important principle in improv comedy. And how “Yes, and...” works, is that when you're on stage with someone and one person initiates a line or an idea, your job is simply to receive that idea and build on it...to say “yes” to whatever they give you, whether you like it or not...whether you wanted the scene to go that direction or not. If you don't play along with the line or idea you're given, it'll kill the scene.³

For example, if you are on stage improvising a scene and the other person says, “*I have an apple.*” And you say, “*No, that's an orange*” – it kills the creativity and the scene. On the other hand you could say, “*Yes you have an apple, and I can't wait to take a bite out of it because they looked so good at the farmer's market...*” You're accepting the idea as it is, and then you're adding to it.”⁴ See how that works?

When explaining this improv concept in a business seminar,

² Tilstra, *ibid.*

³ MaryAnn McKibben Dana, “*Yes, And*” *On Stage and In Life*, Video by Eerdmans Publishing (June 11, 2018), accessed on Sept. 9, 2018 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZUoMD0EkoDk>.

⁴ Katie Freiling, ““Yes And” (Improv Technique for Creative Conversations)” *YouTube Video* (July 15, 2014), accessed on Sept. 9, 2018 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zv7OBAlhjfK>.

motivational speaker Avish Parashar says, “I need to pause and take a moment to speak to my realist friends who are saying ‘That’s fine for improv but in *real* life you can’t say “yes, and...” to everything; sometimes you disagree!’ And you are right. ‘Yes, and...’ is not a literal technique, it’s a mentality. So I’m not suggesting when the office slacker comes to you and says, ‘I haven’t worked on this project in three weeks can you do it for me?’ that you say, ‘Yes, and let me pick up your dry cleaning too.’”⁵

“Yes, and...” is not a literal technique. “Yes, and...” is an open-minded mentality that lets you explore ideas and build relationships. When someone comes to you with a suggestion or an opportunity presents itself or there’s an epiphany moment in your life your first reaction might be to say, “Yes, but.” But “Yes, but” cuts everything off. It keeps you stuck where you are. “Yes, but” kills creativity and it assumes that *you* are the one that knows best. And maybe you do, but maybe you don’t...and you’ll never know if you just go around

cutting off people’s ideas. Really saying “Yes, but...” or “No, actually” are just ways of saying “No.” And the word “No” itself actually triggers a fight or flight response in us and raises our stress hormones like cortisol...biologically and psychologically it creates defensiveness.⁶

On the other hand, “Yes, and...” creates openness and an accepting posture and lets you explore and dig deeper and build a relationship. So if someone comes to you with a suggestion, instead of saying “Yes, but” try saying, “Yes, and why do you think that? Yes, and how else can we achieve that goal? Yes, and what are some objectives that this ties into?”⁷

Think about your worst customer services experiences. They are probably almost always, “Yes, but...” scenarios: “Yes, but that’s not our policy.” “Yes, but you don’t have a receipt.” “Yes, but that’s not my job.”

Imagine what it would be like if everyone reacted with a “Yes, and...” mentality, instead of a

⁵ Avish Parashar, “Yes, And - Improv Game Application,” *YouTube Video* (Jan. 31, 2013), accessed on Sept. 9, 2018 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HOfVon-4dzc>.

⁶ Freiling, *ibid*.

⁷ Parashar, *ibid*.

“Yes, but..” or *“No, actually...”* attitude. Again, this doesn’t mean that you agree to everything; it just means that your first response is to be open and exploratory. Sounds great right? A bit utopian perhaps? Well, it’s definitely easier said than done.

The reason it’s so hard for us to have a *“Yes, and...”* mentality is because psychologists tell us that we have all been conditioned to say *“No.”* In fact the older we get the more we say *“No.”*

There’s a theory that we have a YES/NO ratio in our life. It’s different for everybody. For example, yours might be for every time you say YES once, you say NO four times. For others, it may be that for every time you say YES, you say NO 44 times. Some people’s ratios go as high as 1 to 100. It just depends on what type of person you are. But the point is to be mindful of what your ratio is, because we all have a YES/NO ratio. Here’s the good news: it is something we can improve upon as we become more and more of a *“Yes, And...”* person. Because it turns out that it doesn’t really matter if an idea

is good or bad, if it’s new and different we will say *“No”* to it. Because new and different ideas scare us, take us off kilter, and confuse us. And an off kilter, scared mind says *“No.”*⁸

This is what the research tells us. But isn’t that a scary thought? That no matter how open-minded we say we are...if we don’t practice *“Yes, and...”* – we’re really not open at all?

Often we say *“No”* in disguised ways. Recognize any of these types of comments?

“Don’t waste your money, that’s not a very good movie.”

“Don’t go out with her, you can do better.”

*“Don’t take this major, you’ll never get a job.”*⁹

“Let me be the devil’s advocate...”

“Didn’t we try this 5 years ago and it was a bad idea?”

*“Hey that’s a great idea, but it’ll never work.”*¹⁰

Overall, as humans in the 21st century, we tend to be overly

⁸ Tilstra, *ibid.*

⁹ Tilstra, *ibid.*

¹⁰ Tilstra, *ibid.*

analytical. We think too quickly about why something can't happen or how to correct the problem. As opposed to twisting it, framing the brain, that this is an unexpected opportunity – what can I do with it?

Again, because I want to drive this home as much as possible...in “yes, and...”

“Yes” means you accept everything that’s brought to you. Regardless of who brought it to you, regardless of what it is, regardless of what you think it means based on who gave it to you – you accept it at face value.

The “And” means you take this idea and build directly upon it. Building directly upon it might seem like it’s always complementary, but that’s not true. You can build upon something by taking it apart, or looking at it from a different angle.¹¹

The “Yes” creates openness to a new idea that someone presents and the “And” is your reaction to it. The “And” is the bridge to your thoughts, the

bridge to your movements, the bridge to how you respond to others who are reacting to this event in real time as well.¹²

“Yes, and...” endows people with fearlessness. There’s not a mistake, there’s not a wrong way to do something or a wrong way to think or believe...that comes in the editing process. But we often edit too soon...we let our critical mind squelch creativity. Let an idea flourish, then worry about editing it.¹³

We can think of this “Yes, and...” mentality in improv as just something that a group of professionals does on stage, but really we are all always improvising every day of our lives.

How many of you have lives that are going according to plan? Even this morning, how many of you have had a morning that went exactly according to plan? Perhaps in an odd twist of irony, I haven’t overslept on a Sunday morning in years...literally I can’t remember the last time...and I overslept this morning by 2 hours. No joke. As I quickly

¹¹ Bob Kulhan, “Improv 101 (The “Yes, and...” Principle),” *BigThink* (Jan. 7, 2013), accessed on Sept. 9, 2018 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DphjhudZis>.

¹² Kulhan, *ibid.*

¹³ Kulhan, *ibid.*

got ready, I was reworking my entire outline for the morning in my head, improvising if you will, so that I could get everything done that I needed to get done. Whether it's something as ordinary as rerouting ourselves to work because of bad traffic, or something as life-altering as losing a job unexpectedly – we all improv all the time. When things don't go according to plan, the key is to not see these moments as road blocks but to welcome these changes as opportunities for growth. Because that's what they are. And we can't kick and scream and resist our way through them, or we can “*Yes, and...*” our way through them.

So our theme this year at Calvary is that life is like improv comedy. And if the point of life, for we who are people of faith, is to figure out how to live life with a little more hope, a little more love, a little more grace – then “*Yes, And...*” is a key principle for us, too.

We are a people of improv because we are the people of God – and God is the Great Improvisor. We tend to think of God as immutable and unchanging and omniscient and

omnipotent (fancy words for all-knowing and all-powerful)...which are all grand words for God that hold a strong place throughout Christian history and theology. But Scripture reveals to us a constantly-changing God. That's not to say that certain things about God do not change – things like God's presence in our lives and God's love for all of us and for the world do not change. But *how* God is in relationship with us and the world is always changing...from the beginning to the end – just as we saw in our Scriptures today.

God has given us agency (“free will”) – we're not robots – so how God is at work in the world is always changing because *we* are always changing. God adapts to us. We adapt to life. Everything is about adaptation and growth – and most of the time when we run into problems, it's because we get stuck on our own way or insist on our way being the only way.

This is why we turn to Scripture to redirect our hearts and minds. And the God of Scripture is a “*Yes, and...*” God.

In the beginning God created the heavens *and* the earth. It wasn't enough for God to hang out in heaven alone, earth was brewing in God's imagination. And when God started to create, everything God saw was good and God just kept adding and adding, almost like an excited kid with a big pile of legos...the possibilities are endless!

Yes to the dark, *and* to the light. *Yes* to the waters, *and* to the sky. *Yes* to vegetation, *and* to creeping things. *Yes* to animals in the sea, *and* to animals in the sky. *Yes* to male and *yes* to female. *Yes* to creating and working hard, and *yes* to resting on the seventh day.¹⁴

Yes to having a people with a Promised Land, and *Yes* to having them wander in the wilderness forever to find it.

Yes to the rule of kings, and *yes* to the checks and balances of prophets.

Yes to songs of prayer in Psalms and *Yes* to tidbits of wisdom in Proverbs.

Yes to God's presence in human love in the Song of

Solomon and *Yes* to God's presence in suffering in Job.

Yes to God our Creator, and *Yes* to Jesus, a baby who was born on earth, Emmanuel – God with us – the Light of the World – our friend and teacher who came to show us the way.

Yes to Jesus ministering to people in new ways, and *Yes* to him teaching his disciples how to minister too.

Yes to Jesus honoring the law and the prophets, and *Yes* to Jesus saying he came to fulfill them, giving us a new commandment – which said – *Yes* to loving God, and *yes* to loving others.¹⁵

Yes to five loaves and two fishes, and *Yes* to feeding 5,000 people with it.

Yes to healings, and *Yes* to teachings.

Yes to Jesus' time on earth ending, and *Yes* to a new gift – the Holy Spirit – alive and at work in the world.

Yes to “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” and *Yes* to a new heaven and earth

¹⁴ From the Genesis text read today.

¹⁵ From the Matthew text read today.

where mourning and death will be no more and where all things will be made new.¹⁶

Yes to God being the Alpha – the Beginning – and *Yes* to God being the Omega – the End, or the Fulfillment.¹⁷ As Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber once said from this very pulpit, “*God is both our origin and our destination.*”¹⁸

Yes God loves you and *Yes* God loves me. *Yes* God created you as beloved and *Yes* God is calling you to live out your belovedness. *Yes* God forgives your sins, and *Yes* God gives you grace and a second chance to begin again today.

Throughout this whole year we will be exploring this arc of the “*Yes, And...*” God throughout Scripture – looking at different people and their responses to life events in relation to their faith...reading stories that exemplify this principle of “*Yes, And...*” and ones that challenge it. It’s going to be a great year. But we don’t just want to study this idea of being a “*Yes, And...*” people...we want to find better ways to live it. Because truly...in our world

today...in our conversations with family and friends, in our decision making and ministry in church, in our political and civil discourse, in our work for justice and mercy and for solutions that alleviate suffering and pain – we need more “*Yes, And...*” people in the world, don’t we?

We are those people. And it takes a lot of practice to be those people...people who say, “*Yes, and...*” instead of “*Yes, but...*” or “*No, actually.*” If “*Yes, And...*” is a mentality of thought and a way of being in the heart that is to truly become how we act and speak in the world...then we need practices that help us cultivate it. If we are conditioned as we are to say, “*No,*” or “*Yes, but....*” – then who is conditioning us to say, “*Yes, And...*”?

If our God is an Improvising God, then we are an Improvising people. And in an age of fear and uncertainty and a sense of wanting to stay in our comfort zones and rely upon what we already know to be true from our own experience, then “*Yes, And...*” is not something that is

¹⁶ From our Revelation text today.

¹⁷ From our Revelation text today.

¹⁸ A line from the homily that Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber gave at Lauren Peterson’s memorial service at Calvary two years ago.

necessarily going to be natural for us. We have to practice it, just like improv comedy troupes do. We have to practice “Yes, And...” to counteract our culture of “No, You’re Wrong” or “No, that’s Not Possible” with “Yes, I can see your point” and “Yes, let’s try it,” or “Yes, tell me more.”

The year is going to be divided up into 6 pairs of spiritual practices that we believe will help us become more of a “Yes, And...” people in the world.

These practices, we believe, will help all of us cultivate a more open heart and a more creative spirit...to be more willing to learn from others and ourselves...and to be more willing to be okay with not always having to be right or prove a point.

These **Spiritual Practices of “Yes, And...”**? are listed on the front cover of your Order of Worship today:

Exposure + Decompression

Yes, you can step outside of your comfort zone...and you can go back to it.

Storytelling + Listening

Yes, your story is important...and you can learn from everyone’s story.

Being Open + Making Space

Yes, you can be open to different ideas...and you can create space for them within what you already know.

Passion + Humility

Yes, you feel what you feel...and you can practice humility.

Challenge + Celebration

Yes, life pushes you to your limits...and celebration can come in unexpectedly places.

Preparing + Improv-ing

Yes, you can stick to a plan...and you can improv(e) along the way.

Along with exploring these practices in worship, we’ll also have an experiential time outside of worship to look at these six pairs of practices. And we hope you will join us for these practices...as they are an important part of living out what it means to be a “Yes, And...” people. Watch your enews for a list of those opportunities.

Pastor MaryAnn McKibbons Dana writes, “We meet an improvising God constantly in Scripture. God experiments, changes God’s mind, and works in partnership with people to bring about the Yes that’s at the heart of improv – and also the gospel.”¹⁹

Even when we suffer we believe that God is fiercely present in our suffering, moving us in the direction of wholeness and hope and *Yes*. We believe this because the God we meet in Scripture is the crucified One on the cross, who endured the most devastating *No* the powers of the day could dish out – and turned it to *Yes* three days later.²⁰

God is an improvising God of “*Yes, and...*” and we are God’s improvising people...called to improve the world.

Calvary, if nothing else, I’m just going to ask you all today to say “*Yes,*” to this theme, to this adventure of practices...and we’ll build the “*And...*” together as we go.

Who knows where it will take us our how our life together

will unfold. That’s the point. It’s all a grand improv experiment anyway...but the most important thing is that we’ll be saying “*Yes*” to God, to one another, and to ourselves...and to being open to live and learn all along the way.

Just like in improv, in life we need an ensemble cast – especially in faith. Our lives are not meant to be solo acts, we need one another to be the most compassionate, creative and faith-filled people possible. So let’s do this!

Are you willing to say “*Yes,*” to this adventure together?

Congregation responds: “*Yes.*”

Then instead of “*Amen*”...I’ll just say...

“*And...*”

¹⁹ MaryAnn McKibbons Dana, *God, Improv, and the Art of Living* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.) 2018, pg 23.

²⁰ Dana, pg 25.