

“Yes, to the Established Community...and to Newcomers”

First Sermon in the Series: “Yes, And...Exposure + Decompression”

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

Acts 10:1-6, 9-28, 34-35, 44-48 (NRSV)

Last week on Gathering Sunday we introduced Calvary’s theme for the year: “*Yes, and...*”, which is the first and most important rule in improv comedy.

The “*Yes*” means you accept whatever line or scenario is given to you on stage (whether you like it or not), and the “*And*” means you build upon it with your ideas and thoughts. This is crucial in improv comedy because if your partner on stage says, “*I’m driving a car,*” (mimic driving) and you say, “*No you’re not*” – then you’ve really killed the scene...and made your partner look bad. However if you say, “*Yes, you’re driving a car, and hey...I think that’s my car you’re driving!*” then you have built upon the scene and even created a little drama for things to move forward.

This seems like a fairly straightforward concept in improv comedy, but what about

in life? Life hands us stuff, good and bad, and we can either resist it kicking and screaming or we can accept it and find a way to move forward with it. I’m not saying this happens overnight, by the way. Read *Finding Theo*.¹

We are called to be a “*Yes, and...*” people because God is a “*Yes, and...*” God. God responds and adapts based on what we do, we respond and adapt based on what life gives us, and the cycle continues. This cycle of “*Yes, and...*” can be seen throughout scripture. We are going to look at two guys today – Peter and Cornelius – and how they said, “*Yes, and...*” to a most bazaar circumstance.

But before we dive into their story, I want to back up and just say that today’s sermon is the first of five that will be looking at the spiritual practices of **Exposure + Decompression:** *Yes, you can step outside of*

¹ Author of *Finding Theo: A Father’s True Story of Loss, Courage, and Discovery*, Timothy Krause, was at

Calvary this morning sharing about his son’s spinal cord injury and their family journey.

your comfort zone...and you can go back to it.

I noted last week that the year is going to be divided into six pairs of spiritual practices that we believe will help us practice this “Yes, and...” mentality so that we become more and more like our Improvising God (and a little kinder and less judgmental too).

Exposure + Decompression are paired together because you can’t have one without the other without something going awry. If you are constantly exposing yourself to new thoughts and ideas without ever processing them or taking a break – you’re looking at a recipe for burnout. If you are constantly decompressing (aka: staying in your comfort zone), then you are not growing – spiritually, emotionally, intellectually, or otherwise.

Usually we think of the word exposure in terms of “exposure to the elements” or “exposure to the flu” or “being exposed to someone else” (they see you without clothes on or, more likely than your physical body being exposed your character is exposed, i.e. they find out you’re not really the genius you said you were – you’ve been

cheating and committing fraud, etc.). Exposure is something to be protected against, to be shielded from, because it has a connotation of attack or threat. In reality, most instances of exposure have to do with us being in a vulnerable state. And when you are vulnerable, yes, you can get hurt, and you can grow and deepen.

Some exposure actually helps you develop a thicker skin (think of callouses on your feet or fingers) or strengthen your immune system (that’s why we’re not supposed to use hand sanitizer all the time so that our body can build up resistance to disease). Really our whole lives are ones of exposure...being exposed to new things...especially when we are babies...constantly growing and learning...and the teenager years are full of exposure – in all kinds of ways...and really in our early adulthood as we go off on our own and make our way in the world. But then something shifts in our lives, for most of us, and we begin to prefer our comfort zones. In fact we retreat to our comfort zones when we feel exposed and we’re more want to stay there...to the point where we get wary of ever coming out.

We're fearful that our values or beliefs will be threatened or challenged. Life is hard enough and we're tired of change – so we try to shield ourselves from it with an invisible vortex of “No” – *“nothing new or different!”*

But being exposed to a new idea or practice of belief doesn't mean you have to be influenced by it or believe it. It only means you listen and explore it long enough so that you can better understand it, and why someone might think that or say that or believe that. You say “Yes” to seeing things from their perspective and down the line you decide if you say *“Yes, I'm making that my perspective too.”*

But constantly stepping outside of your comfort zone can be taxing. You can get burnt out. And that's where the decompression comes in. In physics, decompression refers to a reduction of pressure. It has the most obvious consequences when applied to gases or to liquids; if pressure builds up and isn't released, you get an explosion of sorts. When Damon and I got scuba certified on our honeymoon, we learned about decompression so that we would not get sick (“the

bends”), or have our lungs explode. You have to ascend slowly out of the water...so that your body can eliminate the excess nitrogen bubbles in your tissues. You are giving your body time to decompress after its been in a stressed state.

Often the word decompression is also used as a synonym for relaxing, right? You have a hard day and you just want to come home to decompress. It's not necessarily a passive thing. It can be quite active. Just as you have to actively do certain things to equalize your body as you ascend out of the ocean, you have to actively do certain things to release pressure or stress from your heart, mind, and soul when you are trying to relax or come down from a stressful or busy day – or from a context way out of your comfort zone – perhaps where you were exposed to something new.

We all have different decompression practices...part of the series we'll be doing on Wednesday nights this fall will be exploring what these are...but the important thing for today to know is that as people of faith, we are called to step outside of our comfort zones, and it's more than okay for you

to retreat back to it every now and again to regroup and renew.

What does this have to do with Peter and Cornelius?

Well...let's take a look.

Because you could say that this is one of the classic "exposure" texts in all of Scripture. Peter's worldview of who is "in" and who is "out" is radically rocked; and Cornelius finds that his faithfulness actually leads him to a new faith community altogether. Both guys accept something that they never would have accepted before this moment.

In this case, the exposure is actually the message of the Gospel, or as Peter says in verses 34, 28, and 45, "*I truly understand that God shows no partiality...I should not call anyone profane or unclean...the Holy Spirit is poured out even on the Gentiles, not just the circumcised believers,*" (paraphrased). Yes, God loves the established community and God welcomes newcomers. That sounds benign to us today, but back then it was anything but that.

Cornelius is a Roman centurion, captain of at least a hundred soldiers of the army, and is stationed in Caesarea on the coast. He was a "*devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God*" (Acts 10:2).

Basically, Cornelius is a Gentile through and through, but he observes Jewish customs and prayers. He's living the Jewish life, but hasn't made things official, you could say. It would be dangerous for him because Rome required full allegiance (political and religious) and to worship God above Rome was out of the question.²

Side note: sometimes decompression practices help us prepare for exposure, other times they help us process after the fact. In Cornelius' case, he was praying and connected with God beforehand – which is a good practice of renewal and rejuvenation, so he was poised to hear something new from God.

² John Holbert, "A Christ for All: Easter Reflections on Acts 10:34-43," *Patheos* (March 29, 2012), accessed on Sept. 16, 2018 at

<http://www.patheos.com/resources/additional-resources/2012/03/christ-for-all-john-holbert-03-30-2012>.

So one day, while Cornelius (the Roman Centurion) is praying, an angel of God appears and tells him to send some men to Joppa to pick up Peter. Joppa was about 30 miles south of Caesarea, another coastal city along the Mediterranean.

Cornelius is a little freaked out by this, but he sends two of his slaves and a soldier right away. He says “yes” and figures you don't mess around when God gives you a divine directive.³

Meanwhile, the next day in Joppa, Peter is staying with a friend of his, a tanner. Days before, he had said to a woman named Tabitha, who had gotten ill and died, “Tabitha, get up.” And she did. So this miracle spread throughout Joppa and you can imagine that Peter was a popular guy. He’s become a minor celebrity because of this miracle and needs to get away from it all, so he goes up to the roof to pray. This is yet another lesson for us. “Yes, we can step out of our comfort zones...” (I’m pretty sure raising someone from the dead was out of Peter’s comfort zone) ... “...and we can go back to

them” (not sure if a roof is the most comfortable place for Peter, but the thought of sleep and alone time is definitely his comfort zone at this point).

As Peter goes up to the roof to pray, he realizes he is hungry. While his food is being prepared, Peter falls into a trance and sees a crazy vision. In the vision, a sheet is being sort of lowered down from the sky with all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds running around on it. Not sure how they were all staying on the sheet, but it’s a dream after all. Edward Knippers (the artist who painted the work that’s on the cover of your Order of Worship) gives his idea of what it might have looked like in *Peter’s Vision*:



Looks kind of chaotic, right?

Believe it or not, all the animals on the sheet actually wasn't the

³ Summary accessed on Sept. 16, 2018 at <https://www.shmoop.com/acts-of-the-apostles/chapter-10-summary.html>.

crazy part. The crazy part was that God tells Peter to go ahead and kill one of these animals and eat it.

“Nice try, God,” Peter says, “but I don't eat unclean foods. I keep kosher all the way.”

Clearly Peter had never traveled with Anthony Bourdain. Exotic foods were not his thing.

But the voice says, *“Seriously Peter? I just told you it was fine.”* Aka: *“What God has made clean, you must not call profane,”* (Acts 10:15).

This happens three times and the whole vision disappears.

Assuming this trance is kind of like a dream, it's important to note that this exposure to a radically new idea for Peter came at a time when his defenses were down. He wasn't expecting to learn something new or to have his whole faith changed that day. He was just hungry and sleepy. Vulnerable. Again, exposure to new things can come, not just when we seek it out, but sometimes when we least expect it. The question is – how do we respond? Do we dismiss it or explore it further?

As Peter was probably contemplating this very thing, Cornelius' men come into Joppa looking for Peter. I guess the Spirit answers Peter's question. He has yet another opportunity to dismiss this new idea or this dream as crazy, and to blow these guys off. But he doesn't. He's open to talking with them. Remember, these are three strangers who he's never met before, and we can assume Peter is still hungry and tired and yet, he agrees to meet with them. That is a “Yes” moment for sure.

So Peter meets the guys sent by Cornelius. They talk, and the “and” moment is that Peter agrees to head with them to Caesarea the next day. With each step to Caesarea, he was stepping outside of his comfort zone (quite literally) on his way to meet this unclean Gentile.

When Peter gets to Caesarea, he falls back into his comfort zone for a moment and he explains that it's actually against Jewish law for Jews to associate with Gentiles. But then Peter says (stepping back out of his comfort zone), that he decided to come because God showed him in that vision that he shouldn't go around labeling things as unclean. He's

accepted this new thought and is building on it by sharing it with others.

So then, Cornelius tells Peter about *his* vision and asks Peter to tell him whatever it is that God needs him to hear.

Cornelius is essentially *asking* to be exposed to something new here. It's *not* unexpected or unsolicited. He wants to know what God is trying to tell him. Sometimes exposure to something new comes in an unexpected form as it did for Peter, other times it's sought out, as it is for Cornelius.

In any case, Peter tells him that God doesn't play favorites. God shows no partiality. Jew? Gentile? God is cool with whatever your background is because "*God is Lord of all. Amen.*"

Then Peter gives a quick backstory about Jesus (lived, died, rose again) and the Holy Spirit falls on everyone. Since the Gentiles in the group want to be baptized, Peter doesn't see any reason why they shouldn't be. Equality is awesome.⁴

All is well, at least for chapter 10. Peter gets flack in chapter 11 but that's for another day.

In looking at Peter and Cornelius' practices of decompression and rejuvenation and their reaction to being exposed to a wildly different theology, we can ask ourselves, "*What can we do to prepare us for these situations that are "unpreparable for?"*" I'm not talking about things that we physically do to prepare for the unpredictable. But how do we prepare our heart and our soul? Are we fortifying it with prayer and faith and love and community so that when those times come, we have more of a reserve to help us make it through?

And then, correspondingly, "*What do we do when faced with new ideas and radical concepts that fly in the face of everything we've been told before or ever known to be true about our faith and the world?"*

Do we just dismiss them as crazy dreams or as crazy thoughts? Or do we pursue them...realizing that maybe we

⁴ Ibid.

don't know everything we thought we knew?

The point in this whole story is radical for Peter and Cornelius' day, and still for our day too. "*God shows no partiality,*" (Acts 10:34). For an observant Jew like Peter, it doesn't get much more heretical than this. And for a Gentile like Cornelius working for the Roman empire, it doesn't get more life-threatening than this. These two men, from different worlds entirely, even some could consider, enemies, are now "one" under the Lord. They are equal. And they see themselves as such.

Think about who you struggle to accept. People who you think are not doing the right things in the right ways. Or just people who are unfamiliar to you. Maybe they have different customs. Or passions. Maybe they are Raiders' fans, God forbid. Maybe they don't make money the way you would make money, drive the way you would drive, keep their lawn the way you would keep your lawn, dress the way you would dress, eat what you would eat, raise their kids the way you would raise yours, vote the way you would vote, believe the

way you would believe, etc. "*God shows no partiality.*"

This sermon is really about looking at the pattern of exposure + decompression in Peter and Cornelius' journey, but we can't escape it without being exposed ourselves to the gospel truth in this message: "*God shows no partiality.*"

We've built our whole world and society and country and church even on partiality. On some having more than others. On some knowing "the truth" and others being "lost." On some being "in" and others being "out." (Of course, we are always "in" no matter how we spin the situation.) But consider this text your vision. Imagine a bunch of animals on a sheet, if you have to. Or just imagine the face of someone you utterly don't understand or that you dislike or disagree with. It could be a face you've seen on the news, a voice you've heard on the radio, a colleague who works in your office, a neighbor who lives on your street, a loved one who lives under your roof, it could even be the voice of depression and self-deprecation in your own head. Hear the words, "*God shows no partiality.*"

It's not a new idea for us, as it was for Peter and Cornelius. We should know better. Jesus' message has been around a lot longer for us – we've had all kinds of time to absorb it. But sometimes we have to be exposed to ideas again and again and again for them to actually begin to sink in. Could this be the day for you, for me, that this truth actually sinks in? *"God shows no partiality."*

If your answer is *"Yes this is the day that I'm finally realizing the truth that 'God shows no partiality,'"* ...then what is your *"...and"*?

Amen.