



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God, our Father, and the Lord our Savior, who has been revealed to us in the fullness of time, Jesus Christ. Amen.

There's a lovely story that the great Buddhist monk, Thích Nhất Hạnh, relays in his book called "Touching Peace: Practicing the Art of Mindful Living." So he shares, "At Plum Village in France, I teach the young people a simple verse to practice while walking. When breathing in, say, 'oui, oui, oui.' And when breathing out, say, 'merci, merci, merci.' Yes, yes, yes. Thanks, thanks, thanks. I want them to respond to life, to society, and to the earth in a positive way. They enjoy it very much."

Yes, yes, yes. Saying yes! It's such a courageous act in life, I think, saying yes over and over again. Now that is a spiritual challenge. So when my sister and I were little, really little, our parents took us to India. I was five, so my sister would've been about two, and I was super excited to be there. I was gregarious and excitable, and I was generally a whirling dervish in India. This is shocking to all of you I know. And my sister was quiet and reserved.

And so when our uncle met us for the very first time, he asked my sister a bunch of questions or asked her to do things. So he'd say, you know, would you like to play with this toy? Would you like to have some milk? Would you like to try this candy? Would you like to look at this? And Bina was shy and she kept hiding behind my mom. And she had one word for him, "no." And I was like an eager, eager beaver. I was like, yeah, I'll do anything.

But finally my uncle got so frustrated with my sister that he renamed her and he called her, "Nope." Where's Nope? Does Nope want to go to the market? We should make sure that Nope gets some milk. And you know what? That nickname stuck. So to this day, when I ask my sister, let's do something and she declines, I call her, Nope.

And the truth is, I really, really hate it when she says no to me because her nos are stubborn. They are resolute, they're unmovable, there's nothing I could do to shake them, and they're like this massive iron door that slams into my face and all my hopes are dashed. The possibilities that we could have together dry up and disappear, and the end is nigh when my sister says no.

So finally I just asked her, I said, why do you always say no all the time? Why not say yes? And she very succinctly said to me, because whatever it is that you want, I don't. So I began to think about the relationships between our yeses and our nos in life and what we want. And I realize that our wants and our likes and our dislikes, they have so much power to shape our decisions and our actions in life.

I mean, take for instance our brother Jonah from our Old Testament reading. For those of you who are not familiar with the story, oh my gosh, I'm so excited for you. I want you to go home and I want you to put in Google, biblegateway.com, and then in the search bar put "Jonah." It's four easy short chapters and you can tell everyone I just read a book in the Bible, and it's super fun and it's a really cool story. And so go ahead and read it, and I won't give you the surprise ending, but I'm going to tell you what happens in the beginning, because in the beginning, God tells Jonah to go to the country of Assyria. Now this is the arch enemy of Jonah's country of origin, Israel. So God says, go to that country that you hate so much. Go to the capital of that country called Nineveh and tell them to repent. And Jonah responds like my sister, nope.

And so he actually heads in the opposite direction. And I got to say, I think that's a pretty common response for us human beings. When God asks us to do something and we have no desire to do it, we go in the opposite direction. So Jonah gets on a boat and goes as far away as possible from the city of Nineveh. But you know what? I got to tell you something. This God of ours is so not afraid of your no. In fact, you go ahead and say no way to God and you know what happens? That gauntlet gets thrown down and the Holy Spirit gets into the ring and starts mixing it up with you. So don't be surprised when all of a sudden your nos get messed up because here's what happens to Jonah.

Through a series of unfortunate events, Jonah, who's on the boat, ends up in the sea, literally, and is taken back home courtesy of a better mode of transportation than a boat, the belly of a whale. And he's given a second chance to make his no into a yes. And what's so extraordinary is what Jonah does in that belly for three days and three nights, Jonah reflects on his no, on his unwillingness to listen to God. And he reflects on how his no ends up having him face death and destruction, and he reflects on his no, how it makes him cry out for help. And then he reflects how God saves him from his no.

And I want you to remember that. God is not afraid of your no. God knows how to move heaven and earth and the seas and the skies and everything that is in it to create that holy space to make a yes out of your no. But you have to give the final word. You have to say yes.

So Jonah's, no, it actually begins to soften when he does two things: when he prays and when he gives thanks. So in the belly of the whale, Jonah says this beautiful prayer, he says to God, "As my life was ebbing away, I remembered you,

Lord. And my prayer came to you and I with a voice of Thanksgiving will sacrifice to you." It's just like the Buddhist monk said, say to the heavens and the earth, yes, yes, and thanks, thanks, and your life will change and you will experience the power of God who makes extraordinary things happen when you say yes.

So I think the obvious next question that we all can be asking ourselves is, well, how do I discern when to say yes and when to say no? And maybe it's just me, but I find that the lines and the boundaries between what to say yes to and what to say no to, they're a little bit more ambiguous and fuzzy than I usually think they are.

I was asked to lead worship for a clergy event, and ordinarily I would say yes to this, but I have so many other things right now going on in my life. So that when I went to God with my anxiety of saying yes to this, the spirit actually counseled me, it's okay to say no to this, so you can say yes to all the things I've already asked you to do. And it strikes me that that's exactly what's happening to those first disciples whom Jesus calls in our gospel reading from Mark. Those disciples actually had a yes to make, but they also had a no to make, right? They had to say yes to Jesus's offer, but they had to say no to staying at home and keeping up with their families and their responsibilities there. So that decision had a larger ramification than just saying yes.

And so what made them say no to staying home? And what made them say yes to following Jesus? You know, for the longest time in these call stories of the disciples, I would get tripped up over and over again by one word, and that is "immediately." So Jesus says to Simon and to Andrew, follow me and I will make you fish for people. And the scriptures say, immediately they left their nets and followed Him. So I always felt like this was an impulsive yes, this was a yes to the situation that presented itself, and it was a kind of in the moment, do not let this opportunity pass you by experience.

But then I began to think of something that Augustine, the Great African Church father, was fond of saying. Augustine loved to talk about desire. Augustine believed that God actually made us to desire. And that it was through our desire that we would find and discover God. So there's this inextricable link between human affection and God's work in the world. And that deep longing that you have, that deep desire that's in you, that's what points to your purpose, your calling, your place in your life where God actually wants you to say yes. And so part of your life is identifying and acting on that longing and knowing that that is a profound part of what you are supposed to live into. That desire is what gives you your purpose, and it's one of the reasons that God placed you on this planet.

So this past week, this whole past week, Father Bill took 22 clergy from Detroit and Atlanta. He took his two little associates, Father Chris and me, and he took Roxanne Perry, who's our program manager, and we all went to New York City this

past week for a three-day intensive that was through the Institute for Advanced Pastoral Studies.

The Institute for Advanced Pastoral Studies was founded in 2018 by Bill and by Charles Christian Adams of the Hartford Memorial Baptist Church in Detroit. And the Institute for Advanced Pastoral Studies is a program that takes clergy from all denominations and all kinds of backgrounds, and helps them examine their leadership in their parishes and their institutions, and attempts to give them courage to address the complex problems that are facing the church today.

Now, one of the questions that was posed to this amazing group of leaders by Bishop Rob Wright, who's a faculty member of the Institute for Advanced Pastoral Studies was a reading from the Gospel of John chapter 5. In John 5, Jesus meets a paralyzed man. He's sitting at a pool that has the property that at a certain time, certain years, if it's stirred and you manage to get in that pool, you'll be healed. So this man has been sitting at this pool for 38 freaking years.

So Jesus goes to him and says, what do you want? And the man says, well, I just need somebody to throw me into the pool when it gets stirred up. Somebody would do that. But Jesus says, what do you want? And the man wants to be healed, so Jesus says to him, take your mat, get up and walk. And that man does not have to put a single toe in that pool because Jesus knew what his desire was. Jesus knew what he wanted.

What do you want? You know, I bet those disciples knew what they wanted. Before Jesus even shows up on that sea shore, they knew deep down in their belly, in their gut way before they saw Jesus, what they wanted. Just like Jonah knew when he was in that belly of the whale, what he wanted. Jonah wanted to sacrifice himself as an act of Thanksgiving to God who saved him regularly and continuously. And those disciples, what they really wanted was to be able to capture people through a movement that freed them inevitably. And so when that opportunity came along, when that longing was fulfilled through the person of Jesus, they had no reason to hesitate. They could immediately leave what they were doing and say yes to following Jesus so that their desires would be fulfilled.

What do you want? Desiring what God has placed in your heart is the way that you will find the path to say yes in your life. So Augustine wrote, "The entire life of a good Christian is, in fact, an exercise of holy desire. You do not see what you long for, but the very act of desiring prepares you for it so that when it comes, you may see it and be utterly satisfied."

Augustine went on to say that there's another part of desire and that's waiting. You have to wait for your desires to be fulfilled. As one theologian puts it, because God offers more than we could possibly desire, we actually must increase the magnitude of our desire. And Augustine, he used this analogy of a container. It's

like a leather sack or a wine skin, and it's supposed to hold a large amount, but it needs to be stretched so it can hold everything that's supposed to go into it. And he said, you and I know by looking at the sack, this isn't big enough. And we know that we got to stretch it in order to hold everything. And so it is with you and me. By simply making us wait, God increases our desire, which in turn enlarges the capacity of our soul, Augustine said, making it able to receive what is being given to us.

Now, while we were in New York we heard this beautiful story of holy longing when we went to East Brooklyn and we visited the Nehemiah Project. Nehemiah was a prophet in the Old Testament, and he helped rebuild the temple. So the Nehemiah Project started in East Brooklyn 40 years ago. It was a 40-year dream. And this was a dream that was created by the local churches and a community organizing foundation. And they came together and they decided that there was a 16-block landfill in East Brooklyn and they'd like to convert it into affordable housing.

Now, the thing you need to know about East Brooklyn back then is it was also known as the murder capital of New York State. So nobody really wanted to drive through the neighborhood, let alone live there and on a landfill. But God placed in the people of East Brooklyn, this desire, this holy longing. They wanted a community where hardworking, low-income people could come home, find a refuge, build equity, and overcome the cycle of poverty. So when you go home, Google "Nehemiah Project CBS Sunday Morning," because Ted Koppel went out there in 2022 and actually interviewed them to get their story.

But let me tell you the outcome of their desires of trying to reclaim this neighborhood from being a garbage dump where people regularly dump their dead pets and it was thought that probably the mafia dumps dead bodies as well. And how they reclaimed this space to become a place where people could live. And they started with a small wine skin, right? They raised some funds and they got some street signs and they paved some roads. But over time, they held fast to that desire, to that longing to create a community of low-income homeowners.

So today, 2,600 homes on that landfill. And we found out in January they're building 2,800 more units in Queens. And just this past Monday, they're going to put another thousand homes in Flatbush, Brooklyn. They built equity for these families to the tune of \$1.5 billion. Each homeowner, they have to wait between five to nine years to get into their homes, but their desire, their longings are fulfilled all because a bunch of Christians like you and me turned that immovable nope into a magnificent yes. What do you want?

Amen.