

**“Saying No and Saying Yes”**  
Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval  
Unitarian Church of Montpelier  
September 22, 2019

*The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Audio recordings of sermons can be found online at <http://ucmvt.org/worship/sermons/>.*

**Readings**

“Clearing” by Martha Postlethwaite

Do not try to save  
the whole world  
or do anything grandiose.  
Instead, create  
a clearing  
in the dense forest  
of your life  
and wait there  
patiently,  
until the song  
that is your life  
falls into your own cupped hands  
and you recognize and greet it.  
Only then will you know  
how to give yourself  
to this world  
so worthy of rescue.

“Calling” by Nancy Shaffer

When you heard that voice and  
knew finally it called for you  
and what it was saying—where  
were you? Were you in the shower,  
wet and soapy, or chopping cabbage  
late for dinner? Were you planting radish

seeds or seeking one lost sock? Maybe  
wiping handprints off a window  
or coaxing words into a sentence.  
Or coming upon a hyacinth or one last No.  
Where were you when you heard that ancient  
voice, and did Yes get born right then  
and did you weep? Had it called you since  
before you even were, and when you  
knew that, did your joy escape all holding?  
Where were you when you heard that  
calling voice, and how, in that moment,  
did you mark it? How, ever after,  
are you changed?

Tell us, please, all you can about that voice.  
Teach us how to listen, how to hear.

Teach us all you can of saying Yes.

### **Sermon**

At the edge of our house, there is a small grove of pine trees that leads down into a marshy area right up to the end of our property. Below the pine trees for most of the last five years we've lived in our house, the area was filled with a thicket of shrubs and vines. It had always occurred to me, however, that this could be a magical place for a child to play in. Finally, this past spring, just as the last snow had melted away and the temperatures starting warming a bit, I pulled out the clippers and the saw and started clearing away.

It took surprisingly little time to clear away the undergrowth, and, as could be expected, we made a few discoveries under all that dense vegetation. We discovered a doorway to the fence that marks off this part of the property as well as a set of steps that lead down the hill and into the low, marshy area. And, as more vines and plants were cleared away, a small shrub appeared with small green leaves and bright pink flowers - some of the first flowers of the season.

The clearing gave space to notice what had previously been easy to miss and to discover the gift of a source of unexpected delight in the still bleak landscape.

As many of you have learned over time, it is with clearing away what has become overgrown or no longer serves a purpose that we can truly notice what is underneath and be graced with unexpected joy.

Our worship theme this month is “Invitation” and we ask, What does it mean to be a people of invitation?

There are two sides to this theme. On the one hand, we can be in the position of extending invitation to others, and, on the other hand, we can be the ones receiving an invitation. And, it is this aspect of the theme that I want to focus on today.

Receiving an invitation of whatever kind is usually quite flattering and can help us feel wanted. Yet, for many of us, receiving invitations can quickly start to feel like an inundation of requests and demands on our time and attention.

You don't have to raise your hands, but I'm wondering how many of you have felt overwhelmed in the last month. Overwhelmed by how packed your schedule is, how many commitments you've made. Overwhelmed by information or news coming to you. Overwhelmed even by the thoughts in your own mind - your own preoccupations vying for your attention - perhaps fueled by your long list of commitments or the information overload.

Just like the underbrush of that small pine forest in my yard, our lives can get overgrown.

Most of us want to be helpful and available to others. We want to be people who open ourselves to others, to life. And so, we say 'yes' and 'yes' and 'yes' again.

The author Barbara Brown Taylor describes the seductiveness of saying 'yes' this way:

“Yes is one of those words capable of changing a life through the utterance of a single syllable.

'Yes, I want the job.'

'Yes, I will marry you.'

At least part of the pleasure of saying yes is knowing that someone wants you—wants to be with you, wants you to do something that you do well, wants to do it with you. Saying yes is how you enter into relationship. It is how you walk through the door into a new room. It is how you create the future.

This may account for the seductiveness of the word, especially in a 'can do' culture where the ability to do many things at high speed is not only an adaptive trait but also the mark of a successful human being. As much as most of us complain about having too much to do, we harbor some pride that we are in such demand. We admire people who are able to keep more balls in the air than we are, and when they drop one we instinctively avert our eyes. We feel their pain."<sup>1</sup>

This openness and desire to say 'yes,' however, can have its drawbacks.

The theologian Thomas Merton describes the risk of taking on too much, particularly for those who are actively involved in helping others and changing the world. He writes,

"There is a pervasive form of modern violence to which the idealist...most easily succumbs: activism and over-work. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence. The frenzy of the activist neutralizes [his or her] work.... because it kills the root of inner wisdom, which makes work fruitful."<sup>2</sup>

Whether you consider yourself an idealist or activist or not, I think the pressures and dangers of modern life Merton speaks of apply to most all of us. Our inner wisdom is at risk when we have been carried away by too many demands.

Our souls can become depleted. We can suffer from burn out and lose a zest and enthusiasm for the things we once enjoyed. We can also become drawn inward and lose perspective on what really matters.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Practice of Saying No" in *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* (HarperOne, New York: 2009) 121-122.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 81.

Another risk of saying 'yes' to too many of the requests and invitations that come our way is that our 'yes' can start to mean less to ourselves and others. The power of our 'yes' becomes diluted when it is given away without real intention and purpose.

Instead, I believe that we want our 'yes' to mean something. We want to say we are living fully into life's invitation to wholeness and engagement. This is especially true in a time when it feels like there is so much at stake.

We want to give our 'yes' to a sense of purpose and calling. "Calling" is often used in religious communities to refer to someone's sense of vocation towards religious leadership, or to refer to a message from God or a Divine Being about what we are supposed to do in our lives. That is a traditional definition of "calling."

The word "calling," however, can also be understood to be an invitation from life itself into a deeper fulfillment and expression of our gifts in service of something beyond our individual self. That something could be one's community, one's family, or a greater cause.

Too often, what we say 'yes' to does not align with this deep sense of purpose or calling. Instead, we are keeping busy or making other people happy.

The invitation of calling, however, goes much deeper. We know that when we say 'yes' to that invitation, our lives will be changed.

The poem, "Calling," by Unitarian minister Nancy Shaffer speaks to the "yes" embedded in answering our calling. She writes:

Where were you when you heard that ancient  
voice, and did Yes get born right then  
and did you weep? Had it called you since  
before you even were, and when you  
knew that, did your joy escape all holding?  
Where were you when you heard that  
calling voice, and how, in that moment,  
did you mark it? How, ever after,  
are you changed?

Tell us, please, all you can about that voice.

Teach us how to listen, how to hear.

Teach us all you can of saying Yes.”

The theologian Frederick Buechner describes this “ancient voice” as a calling or vocation, and he writes that vocation can be understood as “the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

This vocation may be the paid work we do, but it can also be our role in the community, in this church, within our families, or in service of the broader world.

What would it mean for each of us to say ‘yes’ to the place where our deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet?

Over the years, this sense of vocation, of hearing life’s invitation into deeper fulfillment, can change. The invitation you may be hearing from life right now may not be the same invitation from 5 years ago, or 10 years ago, or 20 or 30 years ago. The circumstances of our personal lives change as does the world around us.

The challenge at times can be knowing how to listen, how to hear.

We need a clearing in our lives to know what is calling for our ‘yes.’ Creating this clearing necessarily involves saying ‘no.’

This feels pretty intuitive. The Japanese organizing consultant and author, Marie Kondo, has gained quite the following because of this desire and understanding that creating space, in her case through less stuff, is important to our health and well-being.

In a world of too much information and demands on our attention and time, it is a sacred act to create a clearing. To create the environment in which we can truly hear the invitation that is ours to say ‘yes’ to. (Next week, we will talk more about spiritual practices that can help us to create this kind of clearing and space in our lives.)

When we have enough space to hear what Nancy Shaffer calls “that ancient voice,” our response to this invitation can also vary wildly. Often, we can get into a kind of ‘push’ and ‘pull’ with this sense of vocation or calling.

Perhaps, counterintuitively, saying Yes, almost always starts with saying No. Sometimes, as Shaffer implies, it is saying No to the calling itself.

Like Moses at the Burning Bush, we might instinctively say, No, you can't mean me? No, surely there is someone else more qualified, less afraid. No, this just isn't the right time to make that change, to take that leap.

Saying Yes also always necessarily involves the saying No to other possibilities vying for our attention. As we move towards that unique way we are being called, we realize that other possibilities aren't right for us.

Learning to say 'no' is a key part of this spiritual journey toward more fully living into our calling and the invitation life has for us.

In his book, *The Power of a Positive No*, William Ury presents what a "positive 'no'" looks like. First, we start by identifying what is truly calling for our "yes." The 'no' that we might have to give to a friend or a family member or a co-worker is in service of that 'yes.' And, as Ury is a leadership consultant on negotiation, he suggests ending with an alternative proposal that you can say 'yes' to.<sup>3</sup>

Ury gives the example of being at the bedside of his young daughter when she was ill in the hospital. He and his partner could see the stress that was being placed on her by the constant visits from doctors and nurses. In order to say 'yes' to her peace and well-being, they had to say 'no' to medical staff that weren't respectful of their daughter's needs and their needs as a family. They felt called as parents to find alternative medical treatment that would put their daughter's emotional and physical well-being first.

To answer our own sense of calling in any particular moment, we must balance our 'yes' and our 'no.'

We must learn to listen deeply for our heart's calling as an act of discernment.

We can also perform a powerful service for one another when we support others in their own discernment. When we offer a listening ear and a space for someone else to hear their own truth echoed back in the loving space created by our compassionate listening.

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<sup>3</sup> William Ury, *The Power of a Positive No: How to Say No and Still Get to Yes* (Bantam Dell, New York: 2007).

This is one of the blessings of being part of a spiritual community like this one. We can recognize in and with one another the invitation to do what is ours to do - to share our gifts in the ways that meet the world's deep hunger.

We can also have trust in one another that we are each searching for that 'yes' and in the process we will need to say 'no.'

We can also see that my 'no' may be someone else's 'yes.' There is beauty in this shared sense of purpose and vocation in which we each have a part to play.

As we cultivate this wisdom, we are better able to see what is ours to do together.

We listen together for the invitation to say 'yes' and practice together the art of saying 'no' so that we might each hear that sacred call amidst the din and noise.

May you find a clearing in the dense forest of your life  
so that you can recognize the invitation that is waiting for you  
and discover your heart's gladness in saying 'yes.'

So may it be.