



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Amen Yes,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on November 23, 2014

Eugene Peterson's daughter would sometimes say “Amen,” and sometimes “Yes,” and sometimes “Amen Yes.”¹ A couple of years ago I was invited to preach across the street at Calvary Baptist Church. In their tradition people respond to the preacher when something resonates with them. They say, “Amen,” “Yes,” “That's right.” I loved it.

Today I want to talk about saying yes. I'm not saying you should be like our friends at Calvary, unless you want to.... Nor do I mean you should start saying yes to everything, filling up your calendar and being crazy busy. I'm talking about an existential Yes. An attitude of Yes. As we just sang, “tell them I said yes to life.” Sometimes saying yes to life begins with saying no to things that keep us from living as fully as we could. Saying yes to life might mean saying no to overcommitment and busyness, saying no to feelings of should and ought and the guilt that drives those feelings. This month we've been exploring forgiveness, and saying yes to life could mean letting go of the hope of a better past and saying no to drinking the poison of bitterness and regret.²

Today we welcome seven new members to the church. Each of them said yes to being part of our mission and our ministry. It's a happy day, that these good people have expressed their desire to be part of this congregation, have committed to doing their part to make us a welcoming, caring faith community, putting their unique gifts to work here, as they are able.

It's good, and it matters, that these seven people have said, “I am with you. I am committing myself here. I will do my part, and I expect doing this will be a blessing--for myself, for this church, and for the wider world.”

¹ The reading, from *The Pastor: A Memoir* by Eugene Peterson:

In the early days of learning language, (our two-year-old daughter) Karen asked what Amen meant. I said it was a word that meant Yes. When we say Amen, either at the supper table or in church, we are affirming the prayer that another offered: “Yes, that's right. I'm in on this too.”

She said, “So why don't we just say Yes?” I told her that she could if she wished. But the people who had started the Christian church in the first place said Amen because that was Yes in their language, and Christians have just kept doing it. Jesus was very fond of the word and said it a lot.

From then on, sometimes she would say “Amen” and sometimes “Yes” and sometimes “Amen Yes.”

I especially liked the Amen Yes. Every time she said it, I was reminded of Paul's words to the young first-generation church in Corinth: “Whatever God has promised gets stamped with the Yes of Jesus. In him this is what we preach and pray, the great Amen, God's Yes and our Yes together, gloriously evident.”

² Jack Kornfield: “Forgiveness means giving up all hope of a better past.” Anne Lamott: “Not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die.”

My expectation is that joining a faith community should change your life. If not, then why bother? The changes may be subtle, or they might be dramatic, but as that song from “Wicked” puts it, “I have been changed for good.” That’s why we’re here, to become the people we are meant to be.

I want to say something directly to our new members, to Carol, Em, Rickie, Sarah, Joyce, Robert and Sheila. I want to tell you a story that was told to me by my friend Curtis, who’s a monk in a monastery down in Cambridge. It’s about the day he made his profession of life vows to the monastery. It’s a big deal, when a man decides to give up his possessions and promise to live in a community like that one, abiding by their rules, for the rest of his life.

Well, Curtis says, the time came during that service when the superior of the monastery, whose name was Tom, was preaching the sermon. And he said, “Curtis, on behalf of your new brothers I am going to make you a promise.” Curtis told me that he expected this to be something great. How could it not be? He was committing his life there! And Tom said, “Curtis, I promise you that we will disappoint you.”

Carol, Em, Rickie, Sarah, Joyce, Robert, Sheila: I feel compelled to say the same thing to you: we will disappoint you. We are a human, and therefore imperfect, institution, and though we covenant to act with care and with good intentions, we will misstep, we will make mistakes, we will screw things up from time to time. Though I wish it were not so, I will disappoint you. If you doubt this, ask someone who’s been here for a while. It’s true, isn’t it? To live in community, means living with disappointment.

Some people can’t bear this. They set their hopes so high, they project these unrealistic expectations onto leaders and institutions, and then they are bitterly disappointed when things don’t go well as planned. If they can’t express their disappointment and deal with it, some people find themselves leaving the church they’d put so much hope in.

This happens on the national level too. We have this pattern of great expectations followed by disappointment. Candidates have to promise so much in order to get elected, and no one can live up to the hype, so every two or four years a chorus rises up from the disappointed class: “Throw the bums out,” they say. And then they look for a new candidate to save them.

Dealing with disappointment, in a healthy way, is a kind of forgiveness. It’s about forgiving people when they mess up, and when they are unable to live up to the projections we place upon them. If you want a relationship to last, at some point you have to learn how to forgive your partner for being who he or she is.

This is true for families too. Think about those you’ll be gathering with on Thanksgiving. There will be people around the table who have hurt and disappointed you. But there’s blessing in showing up, and being on good behavior, isn’t there?

We live in a culture that celebrates moving on, that is accustomed to throwing things away. Have you noticed, this fall, that we’ve stopped using paper plates and napkins at coffee hour? We’re trying to be more green, and we have these little china plates, and a collection of cloth napkins that we’re using now. It may be a small thing, but small things matter. So often we throw

things away. When the going gets tough, we move on, seeking a better place. Sometimes that's what's needed. But often the better choice is to stay where you are and deal with the discomfort. You might find that you can bloom right there, where you're planted.

I recently heard a preacher talk about the grace that comes from hanging in there. That preacher is Nadia Bolz-Weber, who pastors a Lutheran congregation in Denver called The House for All Sinners and Saints. It's not your usual church, and she's not a typical pastor. She's covered with tattoos and the church is a lively combination of traditional and far out. For example, at the end of their Easter Vigil, a somber ritual of waiting in darkness for Easter to come, they have a dance party, which includes a chocolate fountain in their baptismal font. Because, Bolz-Weber says, "Nothing says 'He is risen!' like a chocolate fountain in the baptismal font!"

I heard her recently on a radio show. The interviewer said, "I really like that you name (this, a) reality check about churches, even your church, as a place that is going to disappoint people, where people will get hurt, because it's full of human beings. And we know that these things happen and they take us by surprise and they're so devastating because it's church. You're very clear that this community will disappoint people. (You say) "It's a matter of when, not if. We will let them down or I'll say something stupid and hurt their feelings."

Nadia Bolz-Weber responds, "And experience has proved that this is true. Yeah, I'm just not idealistic about any kind of human project. I try and always keep that in check. I'm completely idealistic about God's ability to redeem our stuff and our mistakes, but I think if we aren't open about the fact that we've made them, that can be a barrier to experiencing that forgiveness and that redemption and that grace.

"What might sound sort of cynical about, you know, don't trust us, don't be idealistic about this community or about me, to me that just opens a door for grace in a sense. Because what I say to people (is this): I'm glad you love it here, but at some point, I will disappoint you or the church will let you down. Please decide on this side of it happening that, after it happens, you will still stick around. Because if you leave, you will miss the way that God's grace comes in and fills in the cracks of our brokenness. And it's too beautiful to miss. Don't miss it."³

The poet and singer Leonard Cohen put it this way:

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.

Isn't the fact that we are here at all a kind of miracle, an example of how the Universe, in its mystery, has said Yes to each of us, Yes to our existence? Isn't the fact that we each have received blessings we did nothing to deserve evidence that there is grace and goodness at work in the world?

³ This interview, from the show "On Being," is available online at <http://onbeing.org/program/nadia-bolz-weber-seeing-the-underside-and-seeing-god-tattoos-tradition-and-grace/5896>

The sun rises every morning. Amen, yes. The stars come out at night. The seasons, they go round and round. The invitation is to be open to the wonder of it all, to the joy and the pain, to the light and to the shadow. Because if you harden your heart so it can't be disappointed or broken, you will miss out the way that Love comes in and enters through the cracks of our brokenness. And you don't want to miss out on that.

We are here to be bearers of love, as best we can, to a world that sorely needs it. To a world that needs us, in all our glorious imperfection. It's so easy to get discouraged. But that's where faith comes in, and assures us that our lives are for something, and that our efforts, "oft with bleeding hands and tears," as the hymn says, "oft in error, oft in anguish, will not perish with our years."⁴

"It will live and shine transfigured," we are about to sing. This is my faith. And it based not on wishful thinking, not so much on ancient words, but on what I have seen and experienced here, in this imperfect and grace-filled community.

This is what we are called to do, as people of faith: to keep showing up, especially when it would be easier to turn away. To keep saying yes, because God and the universe keep saying yes to us. To hang in there, so we don't miss out on the grace of it all. To be people saying Yes to life.

Yes. Yes.

Amen Yes.

⁴ *Hail the Glorious Golden City*, words by Felix Adler, hymn #140 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.