



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Yes And”

Acts of the Apostles 1:3-5, 12-14

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We had taken twenty youth to an outdoor amphitheater to watch a passion play. It was June but it was unseasonably cold, freakishly cold and we weren’t dressed for winter weather. The kids and adult chaperones were shaking with cold. And the play was long—really long. It only covered the last six days of Jesus’ life—so why did it take so long? Arrest, trial, conviction: it took forever and we were so cold. Finally, we made it the crucifixion. The kids turned to me with hopeful faces. “Is it almost over?” they asked through their chattering teeth. “We still have to get through the resurrection,” I told them. “Oh, right,” they responded. We stayed to the end and then we went home. The play was over. Finally, the play was over.

Every story comes to an end. Every play has a final scene.

There was a time when the disciples followed the script. Jesus wrote the script. He was the lead actor and director. He was their leader and—God love them—they followed him.

Then Jesus died. And the disciples came to the conclusion that the play was over. Finished. Done. But then there was resurrection and they discovered that this play had another act. The story continued. But the disciples didn’t know how to write it.

There was no script. No handbook. No manual. How does one live out this Jesus movement without Jesus? He left instructions but they were long on generalities and short on specifics. It was time for improvisation.

I personally do not excel at improvisation. I like to have a plan. I like to have things written out. I like to know what the next line is going to be. I am a manuscript preacher. Yes, I have written out my sermon on improvisation.

Some people (not me) are just naturally good at improvisation. At least that’s what I used to think.

For five years, I lived in a church that had a basement theatre. That theatre was the home of an improvisational comedy troupe called *Chicago City Limits*. The troupe was an offshoot of *Second City*, the Chicago improv group that, over the years, has produced some of the best-known members of the *Saturday Night Live* cast. In the five years I lived in the church, I got to know the group pretty well. I watched them rehearse. I watched them perform. Before that experience, I always thought that improv troupes never rehearsed and went out on stage and just made things up. I learned that such groups put in hours and hours of practice in order to be spontaneous.

Jim Hildreth does the same. Jim is good at reading and playing notes on a page. Incredibly good at it. Whether at the organ or piano, he plays the notes on the page with dexterity and musicality, precision and passion. He is also a gifted improviser. He does this most Sundays as the postlude. He plays variations on a hymn tune. He weaves in and out of an established melody. As he plays, all he has in front of him is the hymn as it appears in our hymnal. The improvisation is all Jim. Does he make it up as he goes? Yes and no. He practices the improvisation. He explores possibilities. And, then, in the moment, he plays. In other words, good improvisation takes practice. Years of practice.

On January 15, 2009, US Airways Flight 1549 took off from New York's LaGuardia Airport with Chesley Sullenberger as the pilot. Within minutes, the plane was hit by a flock of geese and the engines went out.

Sullenberger has never been in the air above New York and had his engines go out. He's in a new situation. He falls back on three decades of experience and training. He improvises. He looks around, he sees the Hudson River, and he thinks, "I can dip down in there. I might hit something, but it's less of a problem than landing in the middle of Manhattan. I'm going to give it a try."

It's a classic story of improvisation as Sullenberger brings into that moment all that he has learned over a long period of time.¹

The truth is that much of life is improvisation. It is a rare day when we are not asked to say or try something that's not on the page, that isn't in the script. Which means that improvisation is a useful skill to have in all sorts of settings because you never know when life is going to throw new things at you. Take last Sunday here at Broad Street. There was no electricity all morning. I was off last Sunday but I've been told that the staff and congregation did a fabulous job of improvising.

We negotiate the unexpected through improvisation. Driving right now in central Ohio with all of the potholes in our streets involves a lot of improvisation. In every business, in every field, change is occurring at a faster and faster rate. One Broadstreeter shared that his organization has a five-year plan that they change every day. Which means that improvisation is a useful skill. Let's return to the world of comedy improv. The basis of all successful improv is something called "yes and."

You start with "yes." When you are creating something out of nothing, the first rule is to agree. Say "yes" to what has just been said.

I'm going to use an example provided by *Second City* alum Tina Fey. She imagines an improv scene that begins with the line, "I can't believe it's so hot in here." If I begin a scene with that line and you say, "No, it's not hot in here," the scene is over. There is no way to continue. Improv is built on "yes." But it doesn't end with "yes."

The second rule of improv is the simple word "and." Agree and... Agree and add something. Build on what has been said. It's not enough to say "yes." You have to add something of your own. You have to contribute.

Again Tina Fey

If I start a scene with "I can't believe it's so hot in here," and you just say, "Yeah..." we're kind of at a standstill. But if I say, "I can't believe it's so hot in here," and you say, "What did you expect? We're in hell." Or if I say, "I can't believe it's so hot in here," and you say, "Yes, this can't be good for the wax figures." Or if I say, "I can't believe it's so hot in here," and you say, "I told you we shouldn't have crawled into this dog's mouth," now we're getting somewhere.²

The first rule of improv is to welcome, affirm and value each other's contribution, no matter how strange it sounds, listening to each other without judgment.

And yes, that is incredibly applicable to just about every aspect of life. I wonder how much of life shuts down when we are quick to say "no" rather than "yes," and how expansive life with God and others can be when we choose to live with a welcoming, affirming, resounding "yes."³

¹ <https://www.faithandleadership.com/multimedia/samuel-wells-improvising-leadership>

² Tina Fey, *Bossypants*, 2011.

³ <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/life/article/Sermon-Learning-to-say-yes-to-life-s-10977338.php>

Equally important is the “and.” The “and” is all about contributing to the solution, adding to the work, sharing our gifts and insights to make something even better. That’s what Jim does in every part of his work within the church. That is a worthy goal of all of us who are a part of this enterprise.

The truth is that every generation of believers faces new circumstances that call for improvisation. That is the situation the disciples find themselves in after the resurrection. It is overwhelming. But they discover resources within themselves: all they learned from Jesus, their own energy and passion and love. And, they have the gift of the Holy Spirit. That’s church language for God’s promise to support us and empower us and help us do things we don’t think we are capable of. The most dynamic gift to the church is the Holy Spirit working among people who learn to trust one another and see the abundant things that God can do with limited resources. With the help of the Spirit, the disciples discover that they are surprisingly good at improvisation, at “yes and.”

“Yes and” opens up possibilities. It’s deceptively hard to do. It takes discipline. Practice. Commitment. Qualities Jim Hildreth has in abundance.

Today we celebrate Jim, the great improviser among us. After the benediction, we will invite all of you to sit down and listen as Jim shares this morning’s improvisation. Jim doesn’t do all this in order to be celebrated. He does it so that all of us can worship more deeply. He does it to honor God. He does to place his immense gifts in God’s service. For Jim, the improvising is all about God.

Each and every day we are invited to say “yes” to God and to add something to God’s work in the world. But, the truth is that there are limits to our ability to improvise. No matter how much we practice, no matter how open we are to saying “yes,” no matter how willing we are to add our voice and energy to the effort, no matter how skilled we are at improvisation, our own resources of energy and intelligence and will and skill only take us so far. We need love, grace, tenderness, forgiveness, healing. We need God. And that’s OK because God isn’t done with us. God is not done with Jim. God is not done with you. God isn’t done with creation. God isn’t done yet.

We do our part to contribute to the story, but we don’t write the ending. God writes the ending. God shapes the ending. God IS the ending.

Amen.