

Britt Carlson
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11 o'clock service

The Community Church of Issaquah
Issaquah, Washington

“Yes, And...”

Luke 19:11-23

Now I'm no theater expert, but last year I was in a book club that read the comedienne Tina Fey's autobiography *Bossypants*, so I've recently gotten an insight into the world of improv. Now I *personally* didn't get around to reading the book, but according to my book club and Tina Fey, the first rule of improv is YES, AND.

What YES, AND means is that when you're doing a scene, if the first person puts out a line like “I'm the ghost of Christmas past” then the second person says “YES, AND unfortunately this is New York City and I've called Ghostbusters.” What you don't do is say, “Hold up, you're not a ghost. You're completely opaque, and I've never seen you go through walls.” Improv depends upon both actors agreeing to the reality that each other creates. It's about building on one another, taking the other's creativity, adding to it, and handing it back to them.

This kind of back and forth relationship is exactly what Jesus is trying to get across to the disciples in his parable about the nobleman and the slaves and the pounds. The nobleman is about to travel to a far country and so he gives ten slaves a pound apiece. Now a pound is no chump change. Today it would be about \$10,000. So this nobleman is basically turning a hundred thousand dollars over to his slaves, turning off his cellphone and taking a long vacation. That's the kind of boss Jesus compares God to. A boss that gives employees an incredible amount of room and resources to create what they want. A God who feeds us a really great first line, and then steps back into the wings to see what our response will be.

Our Savior giving us this great first line and stepping back is a picture of what true authority

is.

Psychologists Eugene Kennedy and Sara Charles say that authority is “the most misunderstood concept in America.” In the U.S., we think of authority as a matter of power—the ability to make someone do something even if they don't want to. Kennedy and Charles, however, argue that a better way of looking at authority is through its root word “to author.” Authority isn't about making people do what they don't want to do, but “about the conservation and enhancement, [*the authoring*] of a creative space. [If you look at it like this], the leader's attention should not be focused on the zero-sum game over power. It should be focused on the maintenance of boundaries, practices, and conduct of an institution that make for creative flourishing.”¹ Just think of last week in the parable of the prodigal son and his equally prodigal father. The father, as the head of household, the authority, didn't try to bend the younger son to his will, but instead created boundaries that took his son in rather than shut his son out. When we confess that our Father in heaven is the **author** and perfecter of our faith, it's a new idea of what authority looks like and it's not just the blunt use of power.

Within this kind of authority, the parable describes slaves #1 and 2 going out and doing things with their money. They take initiative and responsibility. They invest. If we had to have a

¹ “The Hidden Curriculum at General Theological Seminary: On authority, power and how they're not the same thing.”
<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/whatgodwantsforyourlife/2014/10/the-hidden-curriculum-at-general-theological-seminary-on-authority-power-and-how-they-arent-the-same-thing/>

label for them today, we'd call them entrepreneurs. They make something where there wasn't anything. For those of us who have spent any time in the business world, you know how fun that can be. It's a creative act to work numbers and discover opportunities. The business world is—at its best—a realization of the fun of co-authoring with God.

This is what God is inviting all of us into. It's what Genesis introduces us to: God authoring the world and then giving Adam and Eve the command to steward Creation. To co-author with God. It's what it means to be alive and human. We are given the opportunity to do things.

But at the heart of fun and creativity is also risk. There is the chance to lose it all. And the third slave knows this all too well. He says, 'Lord, here is your pound. I wrapped it up in a piece of cloth, for I was afraid of you, because you are a harsh man; you take what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow.' In the Gospel of Matthew's version of this parable, the slave actually buries his money in the ground. Now that wasn't a ridiculous option. In the 1st century, banking was just coming into being—and bankers would have been more like moneylenders than the big FDIC-insured, commercial enterprises we are used to and like their name sounds, moneylenders were none too trustworthy. A reliable way to keep your money safe then was to literally bury it in the ground. When the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, there were also found treasure maps to—get this—buried caches of jewels and money. So the third slave isn't being ridiculous. He preserved the money. He kept it safe. And yet he is condemned by the nobleman as wicked, his one pound is taken from him and given to the slave who had ten pounds.

It seems like a pretty harsh punishment. What was so bad about just preserving the wealth? Why was the slave so condemned?

I think we get at least a partial answer if we think about the improv game. The point of the game is to create something together. To create a reality. To have fun. But if you're so scared you're going to mess up that you don't even respond to the line that is given to you, the game stops. The fun ends. The YES dies unanswered. You take the gift and bury it in the ground. In a nutshell, the third slave's attitude represents "a religion concerned only with not doing anything wrong."² A religion that is. Not an option. For Christians. We have a strict lord, a lord who expects us to respond to the lines we have been given. Who demands risk from us. Hoarding, only preserving, refusing to grow is the opposite of what God requires. It's just true that "Risk is at the heart of discipleship."³

In fact, risk is at the heart of all relationships. All of us in this room who have gotten married or had a child or had a friend know that risk is just a part of the game. Love in all its forms is the quintessential improv game and improv games like all human relationships take risk.

You know there's this strange phenomenon in relationships I've experienced a time or two. Have you ever been in a relationship where you ran out of things to say? Where silence descended? There are lots of ways that happens, but a surefire way is to stop saying YES to your friend or partner in the improv game of love. It's like when you are excited about something and share it with a loved one only to have them go "Oh. Okay. Well, guess what I did last night?" With responses like that soon you're going to run out of things to say! You can't say them because it's no longer a safe, creative space. Relationships wither when they're one-sided. Relationships thrive only when there is a back and forth. It's why listening is such a key Christian virtue. When we listen we're learning

² NICNT 956

³ NICNT The Gospel of Matthew, R.T. France, 956.

how to call and respond to each other and to God.

Jesus' parable of the noblemen and his slaves makes it clear: it's our responsibility to learn how to respond to God's call on our lives. God wants for us to have something to show for our lives. To have something to show for every morning where the sun rose and we woke up. To have a good comeback for the stellar opening line of "Welcome to the world." The gift of life is God's big YES to us. Being born, that first glimpse of light in the delivery room starts the script—it's God's opening line. To live and move and have our being is more than we ever asked or imagined.

This gift remind me of a girl I know who has the Greek word "nai" tattooed on her upper forearm. Now despite the entreaties of a few friends of mine, I don't have any tattoos, but I've always thought if I ever were permanently to inscribe my body with any symbol or design it would be that word. See "nai" the Greek word for "Yes." Ask my friend about it and she'll say 2 Corinthians 1:20 "All of the promises of God are YES in Christ Jesus." God's word is YES to you. We say our "yes...and" to God, and God says "yes...and" back to us.

It's the story of Scripture we hear time and time again. It's Abraham following God to a land he didn't know. Yes, God, AND I will pack up all of my life and go hundreds of miles away from everything that I know. And God shoots right back, "Well a yes to that AND I will make of you a great nation." It's the angel saying, "Greetings, favored one" and Mary reverently replying, "Behold, YES, may it be done to me according to your word." It's the call and response between humanity and God that has gone on since the beginning of time. A call and response that finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, God's yes to us.

Jesus is God's Word that the universe is for us and not against us. In Jesus Christ, God takes on human flesh—to be with us, to talk with us, to cry with us, to laugh with us, to share the drama of being alive with us. In Jesus, God says YES. No to all that keeps us from that YES. No to hoarding and fear. No to stage fright. No to excuses. But No only because there is first and foremost a YES. An unconditional commitment to us. A relinquishing of any false ideas of power so that a new relationship can be authored. A YES to life and love and relationship. A YES to us.

I love the story of how John Lennon fell in love with Yoko Ono. Lennon had gone to this avant-garde art show of an artist he hadn't heard of—and incidentally she hadn't heard of him either—and at one point, as he's wandering around he sees a ladder than goes up to this little door that you climb through and then after you climb through you look through a telescope. So Lennon climbs up, looks through the telescope... and at the other end all he sees is the word YES. He knew in that moment that he had to meet the artist. That this woman was something different. In a world of deconstruction and negativity, here was someone who was saying YES. Lennon says, "I felt relieved. It's a great relief when you get up the ladder and you look through the spyglass and it doesn't say 'no' or... something, it said 'yes'.⁴

YES YES YES YES YES. That is God's word to you and God's word to me. Yes during the improv game. Yes at the top of the ladder and at the end of the telescope. Yes in Jesus Christ. Amen.

⁴ <http://www.beatlesbible.com/1966/11/07/john-lennon-meets-yoko-ono/> From "Lennon Remembers" by Jann S. Wenner