

THE LIFE-GIVING POWER OF 'YES'
(Reflection by Rev. Peggy McDonagh, September 1, 2019)

This past July during my vacation time, I read a few autobiographies of people who, despite experiencing treacherous, inhumane and horrific experiences in their lives, never gave up. A 15 year-old girl from Budapest refused to let her experiences of the war destroy her. A young Afghani boy fought against horrific odds to survive after being sent away by his parents to protect him from the Taliban. An Iranian father still saying 'yes to life' after fleeing his country as a refugee and witnessing his family die in a storm after their over-crowded boat capsized. His young son was later discovered washed up on the beach.

Over 20 years under the leadership of Wayne and Jock, the ACTS study group here at St. David's have studied a variety of books. Some were about people who in the face of horror and prejudice refused to hate and instead chose to say 'yes to life.' There have been books about people who continue to say 'yes to life.' There have been books about people who continue to say 'yes' to their Christian faith in a post-Christian era, books written by scholars who say 'yes' to the bible as they teach us how to take it seriously rather than liberally. Many other writers have shared their 'yes' stories as they challenge their readers' faith commitment and nurture their spiritual lives.

As we may recall, many countries around the world this spring and summer, including Canada, have been devastated by multiple natural and human-made disasters. What we witnessed is that even as people have lost so much to fire, hurricane, flood and war, they kept saying 'yes' to life. Last week I spoke about "movements of people" saying 'yes' to God's justice, rallying in support of the disenfranchised and refusing to give their support to oppressive, controlling governments.

I wonder why some people who are faced with tremendous obstacles dare to say 'yes' to life while others do not. This past July I also thought about the hard decisions St. David's people had to make to address the deficit budget. I wondered if they would have the tenacity and courage to say 'yes' to their present reality and to their future potential.

I invite you to say in your mind, as loud as you are able, the word 'no.' Say it a couple of times. How does it feel? Now say as loudly as you are able, the word 'yes.' Say it a couple of times. How does it feel?

Dr. Ellen Robertson is a psychologist and writer who works with people to help them say 'yes' to life as they struggle to make difficult but life-giving decisions. She suggests that when we say 'no' to making important choices, to facing a significant change, to dealing with illness or loss, that this 'no' arises from fear. Fear of the unknown. Fear of change. Fear of being unable to adapt to a new situation. Millions of years ago, the emotion of fear was hard-wired into our brains due to its vital role in human survival. Robertson humorously writes, "This prehistoric brain of ours is still watching out for the

sabre tooth tiger that got Grandma last week.” In other words, our brain is wired for fear that is no longer applicable in the modern world.

Fear triggers many of the uncomfortable emotions that impede our ability to say ‘yes’ to life and that help us to rationalize our ‘no’ to life. We may not be able to control many of the situations that we face such as illness and loss; however, in most of our life challenges, we do have a choice as to how we will respond; we can meet these challenges with fear that leads to a ‘no’ or with courage that leads to a ‘yes.’

Many of us are familiar with the Indigenous parable about the two wolves who reside within each of us. There is the yes or courageous wolf and the no or fearful wolf, and we have the choice of feeding one or the other in any given situation.

Feeding the fear wolf leads to negativity, anxiety, pessimism and inaction and may provide the illusion of safety and security. Feeding the ‘no’ wolf ensures that you do not have to fear failure or rejection; however, saying ‘no’ can lead to lost opportunities, being stuck in old ways and giving up on dreams. Theologically speaking, feeding the ‘no’ wolf inhibits resurrection and new life. Thich Nhat Hanh said, “People have a hard time letting go of their suffering. Out of a fear of the unknown, they prefer suffering that is familiar.”

Feeding the courageous wolf requires pushing past fear and uncomfortable emotions and opening one’s self to faith, trust, optimism and acceptance. Feeding the ‘yes’ wolf can lead to renewed life as we overcome adversity and to realize our dreams. Feeding the ‘yes’ wolf frees us to establish new friendships, to open new doors, to see new possibilities and opportunities, to live with greater integrity, honesty and wisdom and to survive.

Many religions and spiritual traditions encourage a ‘yes’ to a faith approach to life. In the reading from the book of Deuteronomy, Moses is speaking with the second generation of Israelites who are still in exile. The previous generations have died. Standing on the edge of the Jordan, the Israelites look out toward a possible new future. The people can remain in the wilderness and face certain death, or they can choose life so that they and their children may live and love abundantly. God says to them, “Choose life,” perhaps two of the most empowering words in scripture.

Imagine Moses standing with others on the shore of the Jordan with the vast unknown before them, and he asks, “What wolf will you feed?” The Israelites feed the courage wolf and chose life. I never cease to be amazed by the remarkable courage of refugees who, facing many obstacles, say ‘yes’ to life and leave everything familiar to them to move into the unknown of a new country.

When Jesus began his ministry, he said ‘yes’ to God’s call and, in so doing, he extended a compassion that knew no boundaries. His love and acceptance enabled women to say ‘yes’ to their power and humanity. Children could say ‘yes’ to their existence and lepers and the blind could affirm their worthiness. The disciples could

say 'yes' to their wavering faith. The disenfranchised and oppressed could recognize the presence of God within them and a Pharisee was able to acknowledge that God's presence could exist outside the temple. Jesus called people to be courageous and to say 'yes' to God. To say 'yes' to God is to say 'yes' to life and to love. In saying 'yes' to love you are saying 'yes' to extending that love to all people.

Paul often found himself at odds with the fledgling churches he was helping to grow. First, he would say 'yes' and then 'no' and this caused confusion and distrust. Paul may have been unsure about his leadership but he was always sure about the Christ of his faith. He strongly encouraged the early Christians to commit to the practice of faith that called for inclusiveness, generosity, understanding and love. For Paul, every one of God's promises was a 'yes' and he writes, "For this, we say 'amen' to the glory of God." In the Hebrew context, Amen or aman means to affirm and to confirm. Amen serves as a positive response to something that has just been heard or said. Amen is a confident affirmation of one's faith.

Saying 'yes' is a powerful affirmation of one's life. It is a proclamation declaring that, 'I am choosing Life.' It moves us from 'trying' and 'hoping' to 'I am,' 'I can' and 'I will.' It is an embracing of life that frees us to experience its abundance with all its beauty, tragedy, joys, illnesses, wonders and losses.

Saying 'yes' to life does require courage. Negativity is described as one of the most significant diseases of our time. This suggests that people are saying 'no' to life rather than accepting its difficulties and struggles. "No, I can't do this." "No, I can't conquer my addiction," "No, I can't fight this illness," "No, I don't have the right education," "No, I won't forgive you," "No, I don't have time to volunteer." Sometimes saying 'no' is necessary, such as saying no to injustice, prejudice, violence and hatred. But this kind of 'no' arises from a faith that dares us to be God's love in the world.

Saying 'yes' to pain, to sorrow, to change, to grief, to sadness, to loss and to illness does not mean that we approve of what we are going through or experiencing. It means that we accept what we are facing rather than denying it.

Yes, it is raining on my parade. Yes, my spouse is dying, Yes, I have cancer. Yes, I've lost my job. Yes, we have a struggling church. Yes, membership is declining. Yes, I am caught in conflict. Yes, I am sad and lonely. Yes, to a lost relationship, yes, to each year, each month, each moment.

Saying 'yes' to life is to say I choose life, in all its forms, not just when the waters are smooth and soothing. We cannot run away from life, wherever we are and whatever we are facing. This is our life.

As we move into a new church season, I invite us all to say 'yes' to life personally but also to say 'yes' to life for St. David's. In so doing we can energize our spirits and regenerate and revitalize our passion for what we deeply long: a growing church, a vital

life, a balanced budget, affirming and caring encounters with each other and the surrounding community and a continued growth in all the things we do well.

Sujantra McKeever is a spiritual teacher and the founder of Pilgrimage of the Heart Yoga in San Diego. He writes, "Churches all have hopes and dreams. Through the power of the mind and thought we are able to project ourselves forward and visualize our future and achieve our goals: the things in life we wish to experience, become and achieve."

Through the life-giving power of 'yes,' we can project ourselves forward and visualize a future and our goal. As Jesus called his disciples, he calls us to be brave and to transform our 'no' into a definite 'yes.'

I encourage us to choose life, to step into the mystery and the unknown and to embrace this community of faith with the most profound conviction. In his book *The Pharmacy of the Soul*, spiritual guru, Osho, writes, "Say yes to life, to love, to people, to faith. Start putting your energy into 'yes' — making a mantra of 'yes.' Every night before you go to sleep, repeat, "Yes, yes, yes," and get in tune with it. Sway with it and let it penetrate your being." Choose life and say 'Yes' to it. Amen.