

“Inspire”

Proverbs 3: 1-10, 2 Corinthians 1: 12—24

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The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

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The context of 2 Corinthians: We have all had our words and actions misunderstood. It happened to Paul. Things are tense between Paul and the church in Corinth. The Corinthians church had gotten off track, and Paul had to exercise some strict leadership. His visit with them was not pleasant. But the confrontation was necessary. Then he left.

Now Paul was doing some work with other churches and he would have been able to stop back in Corinth on 2 occasions, going and coming.

That is what he had told them. Except for 2 things:

1. God had other plans. God had Paul go elsewhere.
2. If he had come, it would have increased the tension. Possibly been destructive.

So this is one of those occasions when wisdom and love guide us to see that rather than talking to someone face to face, sometimes it's better to write a letter. We call that letter 2 Corinthians. In it, for the first time, Paul has a new way of talking about Jesus. He says, “Jesus is our, “Yes.” Which is an inspiring way of thinking about Christ's relationship to us.

A few years ago, Jim Carrey and Zoey Deschanel made a sweet and funny movie called, “Yes Man.” It is the story of Carl Allen, a sad-sack bureaucrat in a mind-numbing job, who after his divorce is stuck in a situation where he is going nowhere. His life is the epitome of negativity.

His friend drags him to a seminar on “The Power of Yes.” The leader calls out to hundreds of people to tap into the power of Yes. In particular, the leader singles Carl out of the crowd to delete “No” from his vocabulary, and to start saying “Yes” to every opportunity life hands him.

Carl is skeptical, but he does it, and things begin to turn around. He starts having fun in life. He sees a flyer to learn a musical instrument: He says yes. He learns to play! He gets an invitation to take a foreign language: he says yes, learns Chinese. His friend invites him out for a drink: he says yes. That night, he meets his new girlfriend!

She says lets go to the airport and take a trip wherever the next departing plane is going. He says yes! The ticket lady says, “The next flight out is going to... Lincoln Nebraska.” Which is even funnier if you live in Lincoln NE.

They go and have a wonderful time skeet shooting, going to a Husker game, and seeing the Telephone Museum. It is wonderful until they go back to the airport where 2 FBI agents handcuff

them because it is just too suspicious that anyone would go on a spontaneous vacation to Lincoln Nebraska.

It is a playful movie. It has a theme worth talking about. Life changes when we say yes to the possibilities that come our way.

A few years ago, a group of psychologists decided that instead of focusing on mental illness, they would use their social scientific tools to study the positive side of human psychology. They study things like joy, pleasure, flow, happiness. A dominant question is: What makes people happy?

One study found out that weather does not affect happiness. OK, given that you get a minimum amount of sunshine (about a half hour a day), it does not matter where you live. When it comes to weather, people are about as happy in California as they are in Iowa.

Daniel Gilbert found out that once your basic needs are met, having significantly more money did not necessarily make people happier. OK, up to a point, it's nice. But then it levels off. Even people who win big on the Lottery often start out happy, ok real happy, but then the level of happiness drops off, and usually returns to their normal baseline.

But the pursuit of money can lead people to ignore the things that are much more likely to bring them a strong sense of happiness: a job that is meaningful, relationships that matter, in a strong social network, time to do the things that they feel are important.

Beauty and fame are nice, but they do not generally have long-lasting effects. Some change in these areas – the happiness it brings only tends to last about 3 months. Beyond that, they end up back on the treadmill, wishing for more.

One researcher found that people who have had life-changing experiences which left them as paraplegics often end up devastated at the beginning. But many return relatively close to their baseline of happiness that they had before their accident. Apparently what matters is their focus. If they focus on the good things they do have in life, their level of happiness can be very strong and enduring. Tragedy may limit the way they move, but it does not limit the way they think.

What does increase one's sense of happiness? Cultivating a sense of care and concern for others. If you focus on others and build strong relationships, that brings people a sense of happiness.

David Brooks says: When a person has strong social relationships, strong friendships, you find that in the middle of difficult times there is support. Taking time to work on, nurture, grow, and expand friendships is an external way of shaping our internal lives.

There is a Harvard study that was started in the 1940's called, "Finding Happiness after Harvard." They selected a bunch of Harvard Students to find out what aspects of life would lead to a sense of successful living. They contacted these same students in 1976, and again in 2000: a 60 year study.

They found out consistently: that if they had good health, and if they figured out how to negotiate life's troubles, a key aspect of what these people said made them feel successful in life were strong, healthy relationships.

Recently the British Medical Journal took a look at how happiness and unhappiness spreads among social networks. It's like a virus or an inoculation against a virus. The Gallup Organization in its research found that it really is true, when it comes to a classroom or an office, one bad apple can spoil the whole bunch. One negative person can ruin the vibe of a whole group of people.

But also: Happiness spreads. It can be spread to your family, to your friends, but it does not stop there, it can spread to friends of friends, and a larger social network. Contributing to a strong, consistent spread of happiness matters.

There is such a thing as "Learned optimism": the idea that we can cultivate habits that help us learn to be happy. Instead of Learned Helplessness which happens when we practice seeing our problems as massive and insurmountable, leaving us feeling helpless and hopeless, we can practice learning to be hopeful.

Sometimes doing the smallest thing gives us a sense of hope and empowerment. You've seen that Bumper sticker: "Imagine World Peace." There is also another bumper sticker: "Imagine using your turn signal." Small things can empower us, and give us a feeling of empowerment: that we can do more. And from those small things, we end up contributing to a greater sense of peace on earth.

Gallup found that people who are spiritually committed are twice as likely to be very happy. People who go to church seem to have a higher level of life satisfaction. A higher sense of well-being; a higher sense of self-esteem; and, lower levels of depression and stress.

Things that bring people happiness have a lot to do with: Wisdom. Courage. Love & Kindness. Justice. Temperance. Transcendence. Which, when you think about it, sound like our Book of Order's "Great Ends of the Church." So Psychology is catching on to what Presbyterians have been doing for 500 years.

We need to claim it. To focus on and strengthen the mission of the church. To become aware anew: Jesus is our "Yes." The promises of God come true in him. He gives us and the world a sense of hope.

We live in a world where people do not know what to believe in or trust. It can lead to an inane optimism. Or more likely, it can lead to cynicism, and hopelessness.

Jesus is our Yes. Yes to the promises of God. Yes to our having integrity. Yes to a life shaped by the realism of the cross. Yes to God's ultimate love. That is what shapes us. As Paul says, Jesus mean Yes. Always, Yes. This is not the power of positive thinking. It is trust in God. It is not that God removes all of our suffering. It is that God is with us in the midst of suffering.

Sometimes we are even called to enter into suffering, for the sake of living a meaningful, loving life. Paul is an inspiring example of that. Every time he suffered, he found his hope, his comfort, in the God revealed to him in Jesus Christ. Christ is God's Yes. God's yes to life.

The word, "Amen" means, basically, Yes. Paul says, Christ is God's Amen. God's yes to all the promises God has made. To be with us, to love us, to offer us grace, forgiveness, healing, love, meaning. To give us ultimate salvation. Amen. Yes.

David Brooks talks a lot about the importance of people needing a vocation. He says the best advice he has heard for someone in search of a vocation is "to say yes to everything."

"Say yes to every opportunity that comes along,
because you never know what will lead to what.
Have a bias toward action.
Think of yourself as a fish that is hoping to get caught.
Go out there among the fishhooks." (The Second Mountain.)

He says, simple questions help you locate your delight. Especially the question, "What would you do if you weren't afraid?"

Brooks goes on to tell the story of Fred Swaniker, born in Ghana in 1976, who lived in four different African countries as a boy. His father died when he was a teenager. His mother opened a school in Botswana, at first with just five students. She made Fred a headmaster.

After high school, he won a scholarship to Macalester College. From there he got a great job and went on to Stanford Business School, but he was haunted by the fact that there were millions of children in Africa who did not have the opportunities he did. He thought about going to Africa and opening a chain of healthcare clinics.

But he came to realize that the biggest impediment to progress in Africa was the lack of a well-trained leadership class. So he raised money from friends in Silicon Valley and went back to Africa to launch the African Leadership Academy, with the goal of training 6,000 leaders over a fifty-year period.

He trains some of the most promising young people for free and sends them to universities, as long as they promise to return to Africa to lead their lives.

It all started when he had this "moment of obligation" caused by a sense of outrage about some injustice. He said yes to doing something about that.

Swaniker says, think about these things that make you angry, that trouble you, and he goes on to say you should ignore 99% of these moments of obligation. The world is full of problems and you can't solve them all.

But find one!

Then ask 3 questions:

1. "Is it big enough?"
2. "Am I uniquely positioned...to make this happen?"
3. "Am I truly passionate?"

(Brooks, p. 119-120)

What is your YES to God?

What is your YES to the church?

What is your YES to the world?

Don't be afraid. Don't hold back.

God has already said YES to us.

God has already said YES to you, in Jesus Christ.

Amen.