

January 19, 2020 | Journey worship service

TEXT: [John 1:43–51](#)

TITLE: When Someone Says No

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

No one likes to be told “no.” “Can I have a cookie?”—No, it will spoil your dinner. “Can I watch a TV show?”—No, finish your homework first. “Do you want to go on a date with me?”—No, I’m busy every day for the next month. “Do you want to hire me?”—Can I be admitted to your university?—Is there something you can give me to stop my pain?”—No, no, no. No one likes to hear that answer. (The caption for this picture was actually this: When your order a hamburger without pickles and it comes with pickles and someone says “Just pick them off.”)

Granted, there are some times when “No” is the right answer. When the request is inappropriate, unethical, demeaning or unworthy, it is perfectly acceptable to respond back, “No, I won’t do that.” The movie “Bombshell” involving Roger Ailes’ sexual harassment and abuse, or the similar current court cases around Harvey Weinstein and Jeffrey Epstein all remind us that “No” is a correct answer to all misogyny and sexual violence. But there are other times when you know you have a good idea or a good book, and you just won’t take “No” for an answer. Author Louis L’Amour received more than 200 rejection letters before someone finally agreed to publish his first book. Agatha Christie received rejections for five years straight before landing a publisher. One author was told by a literary agent to get a day job, because she wasn’t about to make any money in children’s literature—that is, until that agent’s 8-year old daughter couldn’t stop reading the manuscript about a young boy named Harry Potter, and things turned around for J. K. Rowling.

Why is “No” some people’s first reaction when presented with something new or different? Too many churches are afraid to innovate, saying “No” simply because “we’ve never done it that way before.” Too many businesses stumble and stagnant because fresh ideas don’t fit within the existing policies and practices. Randy Pausch, the CMU professor who died of cancer but wrote the bestseller [The Last Lecture](#), got married rather late in life. He was about to leave on his honeymoon and didn’t want to be disturbed when his supervisor told him that school policies required that he leave a way for students and administration to contact him while he was away. So Pausch left this message on his voice mail: *Hi, this is Randy. I waited until I was 39 to get married, so my wife and I are going away for a month. I hope you don’t have a problem with that, but evidently my boss does. He says I have to be reachable. Pausch then gave the name of his wife’s parents and the city in which they live. Then he said, If you call directory assistance you can get their number, and if you can convince my mother-in-law that your emergency merits interrupting their only daughter’s honeymoon, they have our number.* He didn’t get any phone calls that month.

Being told “no” for policy reasons is frustrating. Being told “no” for prejudicial reasons is worse. This type of rejection is shaped by the dangerous idea that your decision should be based on something superficial, such as where persons come from, how they speak, or what their gender, sexual identity, or race might be. Researchers have routinely documented how women and people of color receive higher initial prices on used cars than white males—how job searches and apartment renters discriminate against applicants, sight unseen, who have names that can be interpreted to belong to African American applicants—and data even shows that eBay auctions generate different prices for the exact same item depending on whether a white or black hand is seen in the picture holding it.

Our bible passage about the early disciples of Jesus touches on the power of prejudicial thinking that existed back then when people first encountered this new teacher named Jesus. It is interesting to note that according to John’s gospel, the first disciples of Jesus wouldn’t follow him without first “checking his references.” For example, the first reference check came when Jesus passed near the region where John the Baptist was preaching in the wilderness. John saw Jesus approaching and declared, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” At that point, two of John’s disciples heard him say this, so they went over to Jesus and started to follow him. Jesus chatted briefly with them and soon the two became Jesus’ disciples. The next day Jesus saw Philip and invited him to follow and learn from him. Philip then tracked down his friend Nathanael and gave his own character reference for Jesus. He said this: “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote. He is Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth.”

What did Nathanael say in response? In effect, he said “No you haven’t.” His actual answer was snarkier than that—he scoffed and said, “Harrumph, can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Nazareth wasn’t even mentioned in the Hebrew scripture, so how could it be the place from which the Messiah came? Nazareth was a small village of about 500 people. How could someone important come from an unimportant little town like Nazareth? Nathanael’s biases led him to initially reject Philip’s recommendation and say “No” to meeting the Messiah—say “No” to a new way of life, a deeper connection with God and righteousness—and say “No” to precisely what he needed.

Now, rather than focus on Nathanael’s negativity, let’s turn our attention back to Philip—the new disciple who extended the invitation to his friend. For Philip and for each of us, the hard truth is that we will be told “No” in this world. When what we offer is outside the norm, different from common expectations and persistent prejudices, we will be told “No” a lot. That’s why it is important to be tenacious. You have to keep trying, like the famous authors did with their baskets of rejection letters—or like Philip did when confronted by Doubting Nathanael. In a world that often says “no” to things outside their own comfort zone—that says “no” to church and organized religion—and, like Nathanael, is quick to respond “Can anything good come out of Christianity?”, we cannot give up and accept

defeat in this spiritual battle. It's important to speak up because what we have to share is important.

We can learn from Philip. How did he respond to Nathanael? Did he hand him a book of Jesus' collected teachings? No, since Jesus hadn't really started his public ministry yet—and there were no TED talk videos in the 1st century CE. Did Philip try to win Nathanael over with a loaf of freshly baked bread or a gift card to the Starbucks coffee shop conveniently found in the front lobby of the 1st Church of Jesus of Nazareth? No, things like that are just marketing and have nothing to do with true evangelism. Philip took Nathanael's initial rejection and turned it into an opportunity. When Nathanael muttered "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?", Philip replied back "Come and see."

I'll talk about this more in the 11:00 service sermon, but it's important for us to remember that we are not put on this earth to answer every question of every religious skeptic. It is not our job to defend Christianity and prove the truth of our faith to atheists, agnostics, and doubters of all persuasions. If people have questions about faith, that shows at the very least they are curious about this Jesus of Nazareth—curious enough to have an opinion on the subject and willing to engage with us on this topic. We can share what we believe or a bit about our own experiences, but other people don't need to believe because of us. They don't need "borrowed faith." They need their own faith—their own experiences. That's why they need to "come and see." Our job isn't to think for them; our job is to invite them. The same God who has been active in their lives all along will take it from there.

It requires a bit of different mindset to think of evangelism, not as winning a philosophical argument but rather as opening the door for someone's own unique encounter with God. Emily Mohn-Slate is a poet and member of ELPC – and for the Christmas season, she sent around a lovely poem about hospitality called "Red Brocade." It starts like this: *The Arabs used to say, 'When a stranger appears at your door, feed him for three days before asking who he is, where he's come from, where he's headed.' That way, he'll have strength enough to answer. Or, by then you'll be such good friends you don't care.* (Naomi Shihab Nye) What a wonderful sentiment. Feed a guest for three days and then the categories into which you might have superficially placed them (around race, gender, sexual identity, physical health, political views) will fall away; or the validating questions you might have been tempted to ask them (where do you graduate from, how much do you earn, etc.) won't matter any more. Everyone is unique and special. Everyone has scars and wounds. Everyone is a child of God—and it is those commonalities that prompt us to show hospitality and kindness. Do that for three days—come and see what that feels like—and, God willing, the faithful way forward after that will be clear.

No one likes to be told “no.” But honestly, no one has heard more “no’s” over the centuries than God has—including the big “no” of Jesus’ death on the cross. Yet “no” has never been the final answer. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it. The one who was dead is alive. The spirit blows where it will, bringing life to all. So listen to Philip and be a Philip. Come and see.

AMEN