



# First United Church of Oak Park

Yes, And...

Mark 5:21-43

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About ten years ago, I was in the middle of a research project about churches and food ministries. I did ethnographic field work in two soup kitchens and a food pantry on the south side of Chicago. I focused my research on the behind the scenes work, and how churches managed to build and maintain these service ministries.

One of the things I began to notice was how unpredictable everything was. Volunteers wouldn't show up, or the food would need to be re-flavored or modified in some other ways so the patrons would enjoy it more, or food the cooks were counting on got eaten over the weekend and the frig was empty on Monday morning, or somebody would bring in a donation that nobody knew what to do with; I remember seeing one morning a box full of cactus in one of the kitchens. It was always something, and the folks in charge would always figure out how to deal with it. Eventually, a research project that began as an investigation into food-related ministries ended up being a research project about improvisation.

You'll maybe be interested that my research brought me to First United once, for an interview with your pastor Julie Harley, who was also interested in improvisation and ministry.

As I worked on this project, I began to think about the miracle stories in the gospels as improvisational. Today's story is a good example of what I mean by that. Jesus doesn't go looking for people who need healing. He does not have his day laid out in a predictable calendar, with one healing appointment scheduled for 11:00 am and another slotted in at 3:00 in the afternoon. All of these healings are interruptions, occasions that Jesus hasn't anticipated or planned. People just come and find him. In this story, for example, the minute his boat lands and Jesus steps out onto the Galilean shore, Jairus comes running to him, and begs Jesus to save his daughter's life.

The most fundamental rule of theatrical improvisation is that an actor follows another person's lead by focusing and reacting and furthering the action.<sup>1</sup> One of the rudimentary exercises is called "yes, and." You say "yes" to another person's action, "and" you add to it.

Here we see Jesus executing a "yes, and." Jairus, the desperate father who does not want to lose his precious daughter, falls on his knees and pleads with Jesus to come to his house, lay his hands on the little girl, and heal her. And Jesus follows Jairus' lead.

But then, while they are on their way, another actor intervenes and interrupts. A woman who suffers from a chronic illness manages to make her way through the crowd, and she touches the hem of Jesus' robe, hoping that even that touch will heal her. And Jesus does another "yes, and." He stops. "Who touched me?" he asks. And the woman responds, and he responds, and the interaction continues.

For people who are proponents of theatrical improvisation or who carry the principles of improv into other dimensions of life, like organizational management, "yes, and" is a much more generative and productive

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Scruggs and Michael Gellman, *Process: An Improviser's Journey* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008), xxiv.

stance than its opposite, “no, but.” Answering an initiative with a “no,” or responding to it with a “but” often cuts off action and stops people in their tracks.

There is a lot of “no, but” thinking in our world. The text before us this week has reminded me about this again and again, because it’s a story about health care, more specifically women’s health care, an area of our common life that for many people is riddled with “no’s” and “but’s.”

Some of those “no’s” and “but’s” are hard-wired into the experience of being ill. Jairus’ daughter is acutely ill and seems to be near death. Earlier attempts at healing have obviously failed, so Jairus and his wife have heard “no” or “but” a lot, and their daughter is getting worse by the hour. She cannot get out of bed; as this story continues, she becomes completely unresponsive. The chorus of “no’s” has been deafening.

The same has been true for this unnamed woman, who has born the weight of her chronic illness for 12 long years:

- 12 years of feeling crummy every day
- 12 years of the monotony of unrelieved symptoms
- 12 years of waiting, only to hear again that there is no remedy
- 12 years of growing isolation
- 12 years of increasing invisibility
- 12 years of expense and mounting debt
- 12 long years of “but’s” and “no’s” and other blocks to her future<sup>2</sup>

Being sick bruises a person’s spirit, and it can drain us of hopefulness. And that can be especially true if the health care system, or the cultural system that surrounds it, adds other layers of “no’s” and “but’s” to our experience.

No, your insurance doesn’t cover that procedure, or that medication. You’ll have to pay for that yourself. I understand that you don’t make much money, but your income is too high to qualify for an Obamacare subsidy.

No, I will not sell or prescribe birth control for you because it’s against my religious beliefs.

No, legislators in Ohio, and Iowa, and Texas, and other states will not let you have an abortion, under most circumstances. But, they assure you, these policies are for your own good.

The list goes on, and it’s getting longer. No. No. But. But.

Every health care system has ways of blocking people’s access to fullness of life and health. Whether it’s fueled by limited knowledge or religious biases or financial constraints or something else, sick people hear a lot of nay-saying.

In this story, though, Jesus does not take “no” for an answer. The disciples are the first who try to divert him with a “no” or a “but,” in this case from helping the woman. “This crowd is full of people pushing to get to you - how can you know who touched you?” Let’s get on with it, they seem to say, and, to give them credit, perhaps they are really worried about the little girl and they want to hurry him along. Or, perhaps they’ve seen the

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/turning-straw-gold/201701/the-9-most-frustrating-things-about-being-chronically-ill>

woman out of the corner of their eyes and they want to put some distance between themselves and her. We don't know where their "no, but" comes from, we just hear it loud and clear.

A few verses later we hear it from the mourners, too. "Oh, you're too late, Jesus, the little girl has died." The commentaries point out that the mourners have some skin in the game. Apparently, first century mourners were paid to do the work of public grieving. If the little girl is really dead, then their grief work will be recompensed. But, if she's alive, then they get no money. Their "no's" are loud and enthusiastic. She's dead, Jesus!

Jesus does not take anybody's "no" for an answer. He refuses the disciples' "no's", and instead, as I noted earlier, he does a "yes, and" with the woman. A conversation ensues. We don't know what they say to each other, except that the woman tells Jesus her story. Perhaps he hears that mix of despair and hopefulness that sick people have when they open the next door to potential healing. Perhaps he hears her relief at feeling better already. We don't know what they say, but we do know that they make a connection. Jesus recognizes her trust and her willingness to risk herself with him, and he sends her off not only with physical healing, but also with peace. "Your faith has saved you," he says, and the word Jesus uses here denotes not only physical healing, but spiritual and emotional healing as well. "Your faith has made you whole," is another way of translating it. The woman's "yes, and-ing" with Jesus, their interchange of faith and grace, brings her the fullness of salvation.

Jesus continues to extend grace and be open to interaction when he gets to Jairus' house. "Your daughter isn't dead; she is only sleeping," he says, and goes with her parents and three disciples into the girl's bedroom. And he takes her by the hand and invites her to get up. "Arise." Or, as some translations might have it, "Be fulfilled." Talitha coum. Little girl, get up and be fulfilled.

We do not know how the little girl responds to this "yes, and" move of Jesus. That is left for our imaginations to fill in. And that's exactly the point. Talitha coum. Get up. Be fulfilled. Jesus isn't just talking to the little girl here. He's talking to everybody who reads or hears this story. He's talking to you and me. Get up. Arise. Be fulfilled.

"Little girl. Old girl. Old boy. Old boys and girls with high blood pressure and arthritis, and young boys and girls with tattoos and body piercing."<sup>3</sup> Get up. Be fulfilled.

You who believe in Jesus with all your heart; get up. You, who are not so sure about Jesus but are willing to dip your toes in the water of faith; get up. You, who are jaded with life and cynical about most everything; get up. You, who have seen too many doors slam, and have heard too many "no's" or "but's" along the way; get up. You who feel dead or dying inside; get up, arise, be fulfilled. Talitha coum. Jesus is talking to you. And you. And you. And me. He's in full improvisation mode, and he reaches out to offer each of us a life that can burst through all the world's nay-saying.

Talitha coum. This is the Jesus version of "yes, and," and now it's our turn to respond. What will you say?

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<sup>3</sup> This interpretation of Mark 5 comes straight from Frederick Buechner. See <http://www.frederickbuechner.com/blog/>