



## God's Yes (2 Corinthians 1:20)

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Toward the conclusion of the film version of Bernard Malamud's novel, *The Fixer*, the Jew Yakov Bok, tortured, jailed, and half dead in his cell exclaims: "I am a human being; I am a human being; I am a human being!" Is Yakov trying to convince himself—and, in midst of it all, the anguish has left him panting like a dog? Or, is he confident that despite what's been done to him, the loss of what's due even a dog, he remains an "I," a person? What our history books have called "the Reformation" was as much a struggle about what it means to be a human being, a person, as it was a struggle about God and whatever God may be up to in the world. The two were actually a single struggle—two sides of the same coin.

How does one, how do you get to be a person? Is a person something you already are? Our laws appear to treat us all as persons, and our personhood as self-evident. But when we break the laws, and are without money or property, we discover some may have greater title to personhood than others. Legally, I may be a person, but in the concrete I may not, and it's the concrete tells the story. But law or no law, suppose a person is not something we already are, something self-evident?

How then do you get to be a person? Deep in the innards of this part of the world there's allegiance to an ancient creed which reads that you become what you are through practice, that if you're not a person now, personhood is within your grasp—what is needed is merely to behave as any person would. And since you come fresh from the womb with the consciousness of what it means to be a person,

you already know how to behave as any person would—what's required is a bit of practice. It's the creed of the "self-made man." *The New Republic* once contained an article suggesting that, beneath the American male's use of people's first names he's only just met, there lies a reluctance to engage in any true or genuine intimacy with another human being, because he's after protecting, keeping safe that vulnerable self he's made. Perhaps. At any rate, just suppose that you cannot become a person by practicing to be one, can't make yourself into yourself, that that old creed is nothing but a myth by which no one who ever prospered has ever lived, but rather concocted to keep his distance from us, because he has a Rembrandt on his wall.

The first truth to come tumbling out of that blustering, dizzying era called the Reformation is that I'm nothing, and you're nothing, not a human, not a person, without the other; that selfhood is neither something inherent nor something you become through exercise, as though it were a pectoral muscle needing just a bit of iron pumped, but that you are because there

is another; that you not merely need the other, you cannot think, you have no identity, cannot say “I,” “me,” or “mine” without the other. The other side of this coin reads “grace alone.” To be a person is to have another, another you did not make, fancy, or construct, but who was there before ever you were, who is or will be while you’re still here and after you’ve gone—a given, a gift.

Suppose you concede that without the other you cannot be a person, cannot be anything at all, that the song of life can never end with a “hi, ho, the merry-o, the cheese stands alone.” That concession wouldn’t yet make you a person. For it’s one thing to concede, admit, acknowledge that you’re nothing without the other, and quite another to relish it, give it a place in your heart and soul. Friedrich Nietzsche was a bitter opponent of the idea that none is a person without the other: “What? Is the rabble also necessary for life? Are poisoned fountains necessary, and stinking fires, and filthy dreams, and maggots in the bread of life?” But even he needed the rabble at whom to hurl his scorn from his “azure loneliness.” To concede that I’m stuck, trapped with the other, to admit that I’m nothing without the other, when perhaps I’d rather live solitary in my aerie, does not make me a person. But to see the other, to touch the other, to sing and dance because the other’s there, to howl with glee that life should be so ordered that I’m everlastingly bumping into another “I,” to claim the other as mine, my very own—that makes me a person. And the other side of this coin reads “faith alone.” To be a person is to take my joy, my comfort, my solace, my peace, my life in the other.

But the other must speak; there must be disclosure. Did you ever see those puzzles in which the faces of thugs and polished gentlemen were mixed, and the trick was to tell which was which? The parish priests looked like rapists and the rapists like parish priests. If we are nothing without the other, but the other does not speak; even if we take our joy in seeing, in touching the other, but the other does not speak, we do not yet have selves; we are solitary, abandoned to impressions, notions, fancies, misconstructions. I’m not convinced that every “flower child” of the sixties who became a stockbroker did so purely for reasons of survival. What if he, what if she heard a word from another was imagined to be an enemy, but in a moment of disclosure proved to be a friend, even an Aryan, middle-class, Visa-card-carrying friend? And isn’t it conceivable that not every soldier who deserts is a coward and a traitor, but a person for whom allegiance to country has taken second

seat because he’s heard someone from the other side crying for his mother—like himself? Lincoln’s second inaugural appears to argue for civil war as an exception to other kinds of war: “Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other....The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes.” But where there’s a word, where there’s disclosure across the battleline, all war is civil war. At any rate, joy, making jubilee in the other, faith, needs a word. And the other side of this coin reads “the word alone.” To be a person is to receive oneself, to be given oneself in a word, in the disclosure of the other.

But will any word do? Does it matter what is said or disclosed? Will you or I get to be a person no matter what the other says, as long as the other says something, anything at all? When I was a boy, I fell in love with my music teacher, Mrs. Nelson. When she passed by or looked at me, I felt that curious constriction in the chest, that first bitter-sweet mixture of agony and hope I

came to feel more than once again. I don't remember any first word she spoke to me, but I remember her last—"Why aren't you the nice boy you used to be?" End of romance, end of love, without a self because the disclosure of the other wasn't disclosure at all, but the shutting of a door! "The soul selects her own society, Then shuts the door; On her divine majesty obtrude no more...I've known her from an ample nation Choose one; Then close the valves of her attention Like stone." Emily Dickinson's lines have come true for more than one of us, and more than once.

This is a valve-closing society. It's the most litigious on earth, accusing, arraigning, pointing the finger—I'm told that in the state of California alone there's a lawyer for every hundred people—a society mad with attempts to control, absorb the other, all the while pretending to pluralism, pretending to "affirm," as the standard jargon reads. But the purpose of that affirmation is only to integrate its victims into one great, cosmic, unindividuated "me, myself, and I." When I seek to make the other into my shape, I have no other, and I have no identity. To be, to be a person, you may need to hear a "No," even a thundering "No" from the other, because your imaginings or preconceptions about the other have created a barrier between you, and prevented you both from coming to be; you may need a finger pointed at you, an arraignment, even an execution, a death to a sight of the other and the world from the perspective of that myth of the single self. But you'll never get to be a person without a "Yes," without hearing from the other that the other's case against you has been dropped, erased from the docket, that there's no judge or jury left to sentence you—on the contrary, that beneath, alongside, "in, with, and under" the other's "No" there's the greater roar and thunder of the other's "Yes," not uttered merely once but at every moment, since there's not a moment you can be without the other, without the other's "Yes." You need a constant, continuous, uninterrupted "Yes"—that is, if personhood is not to be left to an everlasting begging from door to door, and never knowing whether it will open or shut.

Now, who can speak such a "Yes," such a constant "Yes," with or without the "No," so that your humanity is not only conceded but sustained, upheld? One Person, One Creature in whom the Creator appeared! One Jew in whom God made your affair his own, who not merely lived from God or lived in God, but lived as God alone, was God, because he lived totally and absolutely for the other, for that is what it means to be God—to be nothing for oneself, nothing in oneself, to be so

totally and absolutely for the other that whatever you or I may be to each other can only be its shadow or reflection. One Man so totally dissimilar from us, and yet so like us all—in whom God spoke and still speaks a "Yes" to us all, a "Yes" we could not speak to ourselves or to others. Who was humiliated, accused, judged, and killed because he never let up speaking the "Yes," because the world would rather live with its myths, would rather close its valves or shut its doors, but whom God exalted and glorified because his will was the Creator's will, because the "Yes" he spoke was none other than God's, because God would not have it any other way than to say, "Yes," "Yes," "Yes!" to our humanity. One Person, One Creature, One Jew, One Man who makes evident our shape, gives our humanity its content. To be is to be the person to whom God is gracious in Jesus Christ; to be is to be the person who takes joy in Jesus Christ; to be is to be the person who hears the voice, the "No," but beneath or behind it, always beneath or

behind it, the “Yes” or Jesus Christ.

Now, because he has appeared, because in him all the promises of God find their “Yes,” and because we are his, we are the place where the Creator’s dreams and hopes are illumined; we are light to the world, the voice of creation which has no throat of its own, no self, no “I” of its own. Because, as the poet said, “the Divine Mercy Steps beyond and Redeems Man in the Body of Jesus...length, Breadth, Height again Obey the Divine Vision.” By grace, by faith, by the Word, by Christ alone “I am a human being!” And you my other, and I your own! This at least is the obverse, the underside of what is called “the Reformation.”