

“Taking the Risky Route”

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Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18 NIV / Luke 19:11-27 NIV

So how many of us have ever had to make a choice

whether to engage in something that has some risk involved?

It could be taking a risk financially,

or maybe taking a leap of faith in taking a chance on a big career move?

How did you make that decision?

Did you weigh the pros and cons,

and choose the path that seemed like the safest bet?

Or did you go out on a limb and decide to “go big or go home?”

Some of us are more comfortable with risk than others.

Some are more driven to seek higher levels of success in our endeavors

and are willing to take those risks than others.

They are often those who we think of as “entrepreneurs,”

those who exude confidence and always seem sure of themselves.

Others are more cautious, and only make calculated decisions,

seeking to preserve what they have achieved,

and are content with smaller, safer gains in life.

Often we see this difference between the young and the old.

Young adults are often more likely to be willing to take risks.

They have less to lose after all, they haven't acquired much,
just starting out in their adult lives.

Plus they don't have the baggage
of all that accumulated wisdom that comes with age,
they haven't failed much to learn from their mistakes.

Meanwhile, those who are older have been down many roads,
and have made many poor decisions, and have learned from them.

They often have achieved some measure of security
that is more difficult to risk losing.

Making risky decisions is the focus of this week's parable
as we continue our Lenten journey with Jesus.

As we catch up with Jesus this week,

he has just had his encounter with Zaccheus in Jericho.

Zaccheus was the chief tax collector in Jericho,

which implies that he made his living

cheating and defrauding people in order to line his own profits.

Tax collectors made their money by collecting the taxes due to Rome,

but the only way they got anything for themselves

was to find ways to get more money than what was owed

by those in their jurisdiction.

Yet upon meeting Jesus,

Zaccheus had such a powerful conversion experience
that he offered to pay back all he defrauded four times
what he originally cheated them out of,
an act of contrition unheard of by a man like himself.

That encounter sets the stage for this parable,

that Jesus gives just before he is to enter Jerusalem.

This is an unsettling parable, one in which a nobleman has entrusted ten of his slaves
with a mina, which some bibles translate as a pound.

Whatever the term, the amount equals about three month's wages.

The first two slaves have taken the mina,

risked investing it, and made more money,

but the last one did not do anything but safely hide away his mina,

afraid of possibly losing it,

and afraid of this "harsh" master who reaped where he did not sow.

The parable has a rather harsh ending,

for those who did not want the nobleman to be king,

are slaughtered in his presence.

Our initial tendency would be to try to somehow see a connection

between God or Jesus and this cruel ruler in the story,

since Luke introduces the parable as being told

due to people's expectations that the kingdom of God

would be arriving immediately upon Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

But that is a very vexing analogy to make, and it is rife with problems.

How can we justify the greed and the lack of scruples

in how he conducts business and deals with others?

Is this the actions of a just ruler? Not at all.

It makes much more sense then,

to take a look at the slaves whom he has entrusted some of his wealth,

as well as the audience who would have been traveling with Jesus

on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem.

They were not likely the upper crust of society,

more likely they would be on the lower end of the social scale.

They would know the value of three months wages.

Hearing how the first two servants gambled

and risked losing fully one quarter of what you'd earn in a whole year

would I'm sure

draw disapproving frowns and reactions from the crowd.

But the character who held onto his mina and kept it safe,

now there is a sober, sensible fellow they would have thought.

He will not be going hungry. His family will be fed.

Yet can you imagine the surprised reactions when they hear his fate?

How different are our reactions to this scenario?

I'm sure many of us can identify with being frugal, with scrimping and saving,

and not taking unnecessary risks.

Yet, is this really a parable about savvy stewardship either?

Certainly coming on the heels of the Zaccheus story,

money would be on their minds,

but I don't think that was what Jesus had in mind either.

If we remember the start of our story,

Jesus tells this parable because people

“thought the kin-dom of God was going to appear at once.”

Jesus was about to enter Jerusalem.

They were expecting a warrior-king messiah

who would vanquish their enemies and overlords

and resolve all the problems of their world.

Someone who would fit the mold that they made

for what the messiah should be,

and how God should fit into their expectations

and solve all their problems for them.

If they were the ones telling this parable,

the ruler would return and praise the solitary slave

who kept the one mina safe,

who followed tradition and common sense and practice

and hid the money in the cellar rather than take any risk.

But that's not the way of God works, is it?

God doesn't fit into boxes we make for the divine.

Seeing how this takes place right after staying with Zacchaeus, a tax collector,

Jesus seems to be indicating that God is reaping

wherever religious folks have assumed God is not present.

God is with the outcasts.

God is with those we forget to think about or don't want to think about.

Jesus is reminding his followers of something

that he's been saying and preaching about all along.

Being his disciple is all about risk and sacrifice.

We are to pick up our crosses and follow him daily.

And if we aren't willing to risk our reputations and our routines,

we are bound to lose.

If we hold on to what we have to save ourselves, we will lose it all.

I'd like to share a little poem on risk that was found on a classroom wall:

SLIDE

To laugh is to risk appearing the fool,

To weep is to risk appearing sentimental,

To reach out for another is to risk involvement,

To expose feelings is to risk exposing, your true self,

To place your ideas, your dreams before a crowd is to risk their loss,

To love is to risk not being loved in return,

To live is to risk dying,

To hope is to risk despair,

To try is to risk failure.

But risks must be taken, because the greatest hazard in life is to risk nothing.

The person who risks nothing, does nothing, has nothing and is nothing.

They may avoid suffering and sorrow

but they cannot learn, feel, change, grow, love or live.

Charmed by their attitudes they are a slave, they have forfeited their freedom.

Only a person who risks is free.

When we take risks for God we do so in obedience to God's leading,

as well as Christ's teaching.

The writer of Hebrews tells us in chapter 11 that we will walk by faith and not by sight

and seek to follow the example of the great heroes of the faith.

SLIDE

We look a video clip like this and we admire this man

for accepting the mission and all the risks that go along with it.

The truth is we often envy people like this man

because they are willing to live their lives on the edge and seize the adventure.

He is willing to take risks so he can be the hero

who saves peoples lives from the enemy.

The truth is each of us here today can do the same for our God

and the people around you in this very community.

You just have to be willing to take the risk,

accept the mission,

get out of your comfort zone

and really serve God through the adventure that we call faith.

We worry and fret about the size of our congregation and the state of Christianity today,

but what risks are we willing to take?

How much are we like the slave who hid his mina in the cellar, wrapped in cloth?

I think we all have a mina we cling to for the safety and security we think it provides.

Maybe it's tradition, the way we've always done things.

After all, why should we risk change that makes us uncomfortable,

change that doesn't make sense to us?

Maybe it's the comfort of the familiar.

We like our routines, our way of being together.

It works for us so why should we change?

Maybe it's our dogma, how we've always understood scripture,

and our conception of what's right and wrong

that we perceive as drawn from that scripture.

Why risk looking at scripture any differently

or being open to different ways of living and being

that are unfamiliar to what we've always thought of

as the biblical norm.

Jesus is telling us today in our story that being his disciple, his follower,

is choosing a life of risk.

He knows what is coming up when he enters Jerusalem.

He knows the risk he is taking.

He also knows what is coming up for his disciples as well, the risk they are taking.

He knows the risk the future church will be facing.

The persecution of the early church,

but also the struggles of the current church.

Today's parable teaches us if we aren't willing to risk our reputations and our routines,

we are bound to lose.

If we hold on to what we have to save ourselves, we will lose it all.

What are we willing to risk and let go of in order to reach those on the margins,

those outside of our fold who need Jesus the most?

But most importantly, what are you yourself willing to risk?

For the cost of comfortable complacency may be bigger than you may realize,

as our servant found out in our story today.

May we be willing to take the risks we are called to as followers of the risen Christ,

whose entire life was risked and spent for our behalf. Amen.