

Fifth Sunday in Lent
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
Rev. Jason S. Glombicki
April 2nd, 2017

This year I was encouraged to go through a retirement planning program. At first, I felt old. Retirement planning, really? I'm not *that* old, am I? Then, I felt worried when I realized I need to save *that* much for retirement! Finally, I was confused. I was confused by the terminology and basics of financial planning. I can only imagine that those who aren't theologically-trained feel the same way when I start talking about the bible and theology without any explanation. Since most pastors have no concept of personal finances, they tried to make this program incredibly easy. To do so, one page had a number line, scaled 1-5, and asked me to pick my "risk tolerance" - whatever that means. After reading the page over and over again I began to understand. A 1 was a lower risk and lower return, while a 5 was higher risk and higher possible return. The program suggested that if you're nearing retirement, go for a 1 – low risk with a low, but more certain, return. Yet, if you have a longer time-horizon before retirement, go with the big 5! Sure, it is a higher risk, however there is a *potential* for a higher reward.

In today's gospel reading we learn that Jesus was presented with a "risk assessment" of his own – did you catch it? It was early on in the narrative. Jesus said, "Let us go to Judea again." But the disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Judeans were just now trying to stone you, and you are going there again?" As hearers, we recall that two chapters earlier John 8 ended with the people trying to stone Jesus, but he slipped away. Then, ten verses earlier they tried to stone Jesus again, but he escaped. In John, it's clear that Jesus is in danger!

In the midst of his predicament the disciples asked for him to articulate his risk tolerance. The disciples reminded Jesus that he just left Judea and things had not ended well. Nevertheless, Jesus persisted. Jesus reminded the disciples that as long as there is daylight one could travel easily, or, in other words, as long as he is able to do God's work he will. Although the disciples also persist in their view to stay, Jesus was clear that his purpose is to do God's work. In his case, to do God's work was to love others and be in community. So, he, and the disciples, set off. When Jesus arrived, he found a community in mourning. And he was moved by his love. He was disturbed. His heart ached. He wept.

Many of us understand this pain. We have experienced deep disappointment - sometimes in our relationships, our employment, our government, or our own actions. We're dissatisfied with our colleagues or supervisor. We lament the loss of a satisfying relationship with our children or a significant other. We strain to understand why local, national, and international leaders fail to care for those they vow to protect. Much like Lazarus, we become bound by the fear of death, the anxiety of failing, the uncertainty of the future, the frustration of change, and the hurt of a lost loved one. Then, we feel it in our bodies. We become disturbed. Our heart begins to ache. We weep.

Yet, that is not the end of today's story. Jesus not only sat in the pain and tears, but then he risked it all for love. Jesus journeyed into a place where *his* death could be imminent. He risked his life to show that not even death or fear could stop him from showing love. Then, by the tomb, using a loud voice, Jesus said, "Lazarus, come out." And Jesus directed all those gathered around to unbind the man. In this story, Jesus is not the only one in action, instead the whole community is gathered in God's work to unbind Lazarus.

You see, this is the turning point in the gospel of John. From this point forward the authorities will work overtime to kill Jesus. After Lazarus was raised, the people were set free to do the work of God in the world, and that is dangerous. Jesus is getting others involved in God's life-giving work, and the religious leaders know that this means change. For God's activity can do nothing but change us. When change happens, it will comfort some and threaten others.¹ Remember, belief, in John's gospel, is always a verb.² Belief in God leads to action. Belief asks us "what's your risk tolerance?"

This question of risk tolerance is asked of every person and every church. Throughout our lives the answer may change. Presently, many churches and people of faith are bound. They lay in a tomb bound with fear, with anxiety, and with disappointment. They're disappointed that the church of the past is not the church of the present. They discover that the church of their idealistic expectations is not the church of reality. So, although they say that they commit to following the example of Christ, they'd rather go with a safe bet. These churches act like they're getting close to retirement, and so they invest in low risk and low reward ministries. These churches turn inward and invest in the known people and programs. These churches accept lower impact with only the hope of keeping its congregation on life support. And I get their reasoning.

Yet, if Christ is our light. If we are to be disciples following in Christ's pathway. If we honor Jesus's argument that we are to do God's work as long as we're able. Then, we are called into risk. God's work *is* risky business. God's work is not coming close to retirement; rather, God's work has a long time-horizon. Jesus understood this clearly. God's good news is so risky that they killed Jesus. They thought that if they killed Jesus they'd kill God's movement, but what they did not fully comprehend is that God's love, grace, welcome, and acceptance cannot be killed. Instead, you and I

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/03/lent-5a-heartache-miracle-invitation/>
² https://www.workingpreacher.org/brainwave.aspx?podcast_id=851

are sent to be Christ's light and to unbind the bound. In our baptism, we are called to risk it all for something new and uncertain. At this table, we are called to risk the shame of being seen with *that* smelly, homeless person. At this table, we are called to risk eating with *that* swindling business person. At this table, we are compelled to work to unbind each other and give life to all.

Yes, it is dangerous, risky, and exhausting work. It's not easy to commit to the potential of big losses and the stress of the volatility. We see examples of this uncertainty all around us. An entrepreneur knows that to take a dilapidated storefront and turn it into a thriving business is a huge risk with the potential for enormous results. Separated romantic partners will tell you that breathing life into a dying relationship is a huge risk of vulnerability with the potential for life-giving results. An immigrant family leaving behind their entire life will tell you that it's a monstrous risk of uncertainty with the potential for life-changing effects. A house flipper, a venture capitalist, and even Jesus will tell you that life is full of gigantic risks but that the potential for new-life and broad impact is unfathomable. You see, Jesus was not about maximizing returns in the way of the world. It wasn't about the finances, or marketability, or even the gains. Jesus's investment was in God's work to remind all people they are loved, they are cherished, they are not alone, and, that because of these gifts, they are set free to fearlessly unbind the bound. God's work is relational, and Jesus was willing to risk it all to be in relationship with those in need.

In a little under two weeks we will gather here to proclaim this as God's mission. We will gather to be reminded that darkness has not overcome the world, but rather that Christ is our light. We will assemble to hear the stories of how God has both committed to humanity and called the faithful to risk everything for the sake of love, forgiveness, grace and relationship. Then, we'll gather at that font to be reminded of our baptism into the risky business of working for peace and justice. And we'll gather around this table – to proclaim in actions what we say in words. We'll

receive Christ standing next to those with whom we disagree. We'll eat from the same broken bread so that we might break injustice. Then, we will be sent, to unbind others, to recognize God's presence in the world, and to put into action the love we've received from God. Throughout it all, we'll wonder about our risk tolerance. But in the end, we'll honor a God that risks everything to remind us that we are loved, we are chosen, and we matter in this world. What a risky message, what risky business, and what a risky God we follow. Amen.