

Soul Stretching: Risk Taking

2 Kings 5:1-14; Mark 1:40-45

February 12, 2006

I am glad that you all made it safely to worship this morning. Perhaps you don't realize the risks you took to come to church today. For those who drove, do you know that 20 percent of all fatal accidents are caused by automobiles? You were slightly safer if you walked to church on the street or sidewalk, for 14 percent of all accidents occur to pedestrians. Those who chose to stay home from church this morning are only somewhat secure, for 17 percent of all accidents occur in the home. Those who are traveling by air, rail or water are taking a 16 percent chance of an accident.

However, now that you are here in worship, you are extremely safe. Only .001% of all deaths reported occur in worship services. Sunday school is also a relatively safe for your children and youth!¹

Life is full of risks, some relatively minor, others more extreme. Every day we take many risks without thinking about it. How many of us have refused to ride in an automobile simply because of the risk of having an accident? Younger generations are far more flexible in taking risks. They tend to take sports to new extremes to make them far better. Snowboarding is great; but air-boarding (riding your snow-board down to earth after jumping out of an airplane) is extremely better. Mountain-biking, roller blading, skiing--everything is being taken to new, more daring extremes by Generation X'ers.

Without risk-takers, there would have been no civil rights movement. Or peace movement. Or emancipation of slaves. Or United States. Or woman's suffrage. If risks hadn't been taken, Mother Teresa would never have gone to India nor Albert Schweitzer to Africa nor Rosa Parks to the front of the bus. Athletes would not be at the Olympics in Italy today if they had not taken risks.

By the same token, without risk takers, Hiroshima would not have been bombed and Kennedy would not have been assassinated. Nor would Genghis Khan nor Napoleon nor the KKK have marched and murdered its way through history. Without risk takers, most crimes would never have happened.

The most dastardly and the most beneficial of human exploits have been done almost exclusively by risk takers. The key for people of faith is not just to take a risk, but to take a risk that might possibly give birth to healing and wholeness or forgiveness or compassion or love. To take a risk that brings new life into being. That offers hope, joy, and promise to all. In

a world like ours, that's risky business. And it will stretch our souls to new heights.²

In today's reading from 2 Kings, Namaan is faced with several choices. He is a military commander accustomed to power, and yet he has been struck with leprosy, a skin ailment of some kind that carries a social stigma. Desperate to find a cure for his affliction, Namaan, the military commander, takes the risk of listening to a slave girl, and not just any slave girl at that. She is from Israel, the nation his mighty army has conquered. A man of power receives guidance from a powerless enemy slave girl. She directs him toward the prophet Elisha in Israel. Namaan requests a letter of introduction from the King of Aram to present to the King of Israel. He takes the risk of going to a foreign, conquered country to find a cure for his disease.

His request cannot be met by the King of Israel, who has temporal power, but not healing power, and who has forgotten the prophet Elisha. Elisha hears of the King's distress and offers his services. Namaan never has a direct encounter with Elisha, only with Elisha's servant. This man of vast military power is treated as socially inferior to the man of God, the prophet.

Namaan is angered by Elisha's instructions to wash in the Jordan River seven times. A great man certainly deserves a ritual more sophisticated than bathing in the river. He could have stayed home to bathe in the rivers of his own superior nation. Once again, it is the servants who intervene, suggesting to Namaan that he would have followed more difficult instructions in order to be healed; why not try something that appears to be relatively easy. Just "go for it." Namaan finally takes the risk of following the prescription and his skin is restored to that of a "young boy." Namaan would not have been healed had he not listened to socially inferior servants, traveled to a foreign conquered country, and obeyed the instructions of the man of God whom he never met in person. He would not have experienced healing had he not yielded his own power to the power of God. He has to give up those things in which he trusts in order to receive what he most desires.

In the Gospel reading we meet another man with leprosy, although not the dreaded Hansen's disease. In Jewish tradition, leprosy is not primarily a disease but a form of ritual impurity. The law requires those with leprosy to live apart from the rest of the community, warning others of their condition by torn clothing, disheveled hair, and shouting, "Unclean!" The leper approaches Jesus with great caution, expecting to be rejected and scorned, but hoping that Jesus will accept him. It takes great courage to ask Jesus to

make him clean, for it will be risky for Jesus to do so. Whoever touches a leper becomes unclean, so Jesus takes a great risk of being ostracized himself. Moved with compassion for the leper, Jesus reaches out his hand to touch him and to make him clean. Not only does the healing of the leper restore his skin to health, it also restores the man to the community from which he has been shunned. Reclaiming a child of God is worth the risk to Jesus. He comes to give life and to restore life.

Followers of Jesus are called to take risks that are life giving not just to ourselves but also to others.

Today we mark the anniversary of the birth of President Abraham Lincoln, revered as one of America's greatest presidents. Before he won the presidency, Lincoln twice failed in business, twice lost elections for Congress, twice lost elections for the Senate, then lost the race for vice president. In spite of his failures, he continued to try. If he had ever stopped risking, our nation would not have benefited from his leadership and the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing the slaves, may have been further delayed. Once elected President, Lincoln called upon his competitors for the Republican Party presidential nomination to serve in his cabinet. He took the risk of working with his rivals as a model of unity for a divided nation.

For fifteen years, Christian Peacemaker Teams, have been sending persons to be a peaceful presence in areas of conflict. On November 26 four of their members were abducted in Baghdad, accused by their captors of being spies and threatened with execution. In placing their lives in jeopardy for the sake of peace, members of this small pacifist organization look to Jesus as their example. Cliff Kindy says, "Jesus said if you're going to be my followers, you must take up my cross. That's more than wearing it on your neck or as a tie pin." Chris Schweitzer says, "It's a gospel of doing something radical. Loving your enemies has a serious price."

The Christian Peacemaker Team has been in Iraq for more than three years and is one of the few remaining Western humanitarian organizations. Team members have acted as human shields to deter attacks, supported United Nations weapons inspectors, and documented human-rights abuses.

In a reflection written a year before he was abducted, Tom Fox of Virginia wrote, "Does [CPT work] mean that I walk into a raging battle to confront the soldiers? Does that mean I walk the streets of Baghdad with a sign saying 'American for the Taking'? No to both counts. But if Jesus and Gandhi are right, then I am to risk my life, and if I lose it, to be as forgiving as they were when murdered by the forces of Satan."³

We are not all called to take the kinds of risks taken by the Christian Peacemaker Teams. But we are called to venture out of the safety of our comfortable cocoons and take risks appropriate to our gifts and circumstances.

- ◆ Take the risk of telling the truth in a culture that has accepted falsehood as the norm.
- ◆ Take the risk of not laughing at a joke that puts down a group of people; speak up to share your value for all of God's people, no matter their class, race, gender, orientation.
- ◆ Take the risk of sacrificing a luxury in order to make life better for someone who is hurting.
- ◆ Take the risk of asking for help and of giving help to others.

Tom Robbins writes, "You risked your life, but what else have you ever risked? Have you ever risked disapproval? Have you ever risked economic security? Have you ever risked a belief? I see nothing particularly courageous in risking one's life. So you lose it, you go to your hero's heaven and everything is milk and honey 'til the end of time. Right? You get your reward and suffer no earthly consequences. That's not courage. Real courage is risking something you have to keep on living with, real courage is risking something that might force you to rethink your thoughts, suffer change and stretch consciousness. Real courage is risking one's clichés."⁴

Disciples of Jesus Christ are risk takers, taking risks that might possibly give birth to healing and wholeness or forgiveness or compassion or love. To take a risk that brings new life into being. Friends in Christ, don't just take care, take risks!

¹ Executive Speechwriter Newsletter, 8, No. 1, (1993), p. 8. Quoted by *Homiletics Online*, retrieved February 6, 2006.

² Thanks to Rev. Howard Hanger, "Seeds for Celebration," Winter 2005, Jubilee! Community, Asheville, NC.

³ "Peace Army: Christian Peacemaker Teams face hostility," by Rich Preheim, *Christian Century*, January 24, 2006, pp. 23-25.

⁴ Tom Robbins, *Another Roadside Attraction* (Bantam, 1990).

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