

GOSPEL OF RISK - RISKING PREACHING

Ordinary Time

Mark 6:7-13

A Sermon Preached by Three Members
With introduction by Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz
University Congregational Church of Christ
Seattle, Washington 98125
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Scripture:

Mark 6:7-13¹

He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz

And Jesus said "Go!" And Jesus always seems to be saying, "Go. Go. Go. Get out there!" And particularly in the gospel of Mark, "Go! I am calling you!" And while the gospel of Mark is punctuated with places of withdrawal and rest, they are all too quickly overcome by another call of Jesus to go, and to go out there and to have your life be changed. When Jesus calls his disciples out in today's scripture, he gives them the means of support, the means of going. He says, you got a pair of sandals and you got a cane. Or maybe it's you today: you've got a pair of shoes; you've got a walker; you've got a wheelchair; you got a pair of crutches. You got the means of transportation. But no, Jesus says, I'm not giving you and don't await around for me to give this to you: I'm not going to give you bread. I'm not going to give you water. I'm not going to give you a change of clothes. I'm not going to give you money for your money bag. No, in fact, I'm sending you out to the most important work of all: to believe the Good News and to believe the Gospel, that I am there and will be there with you and for you along the way. You are going to have to trust yourself in my love and to the hospitality, the surprising hospitality that you will meet.

So here we are today: believers, seekers, doubters – probably most of us today. Maybe you've heard a call, of Jesus calling you out to put down something of the safety in your life and to take a risk and to do something, be somebody that you *never* thought you could be before. Maybe you did that once long ago or maybe you know that knocking on your heart today. However it is, we need people – we need us – to be brave with our stories of going, so that we can be brave in making, in maybe taking a risk in stepping into our own.

I am grateful beyond words that Erin and John and Loyce all said "yes" to the risk of sharing a story and also "yes" to the risk of preaching today, preaching out of the only thing any of us have got, and that is the story of our own lives. And I am struck for the three of you, how in all of you saying yes to

¹ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). 1989.

stepping out. It was an act of courage, for sure. But *courage* is *not* the absence of fear. Let's not wait around for that to move. But courage is knowing that there is something bigger than our fears. Courage is stepping out and putting our hand out and being surprised at who we meet who finds and takes our own, encourages, yes indeed, what we say in our covenant every week to reject the false gods of society and say *yes* to the gospel of Jesus. *Yes* – and *no* to those false gods of security and sameness and the comfortableness we have made of our lives, sometimes maybe in our own misery and despair. Jesus calls. And I believe and I know and I trust that Jesus is calling here today.

Prayer:

Jesus,

Here we are, disciples after disciples after disciples who have heard you knocking on the door of our hearts and have called us out to risk to change to yes to belief, to believing to being to knowing to love. Thank you for those who have gone before us. Thank you for those who share stories. And God help us today to live into the story *You* are calling us to live today. Together we pray.

– Amen.

Erin Lovejoy-Guron

Hi. When Peter called for stories of taking risks outside of our comfort zone because of a sense of being called into something new, I grumbled to myself, because I avoid public speaking whenever I can. But I *have* lived through a few kinds of those risks, those calls where I know the right choice is to do something I would instinctively say no to.

Just to set the stage, I have always been painfully shy. The one vivid memory I have of elementary school is trying to give a speech in front my classroom with my kneecaps vibrating, and my cheeks are red to the point of pain, and I had to stop just to regulate my breathing. That is my body's natural reaction to public speaking.

Fast forward then to the summer of 2007. I was working on an MFA [Master of Fine Arts] in creative writing, which was a kind of starry-eyed choice to make. And I wanted to prove to Vanessa, my wife of one year at the time, that supporting me through that dream was a risk that was worth it for her. My plan was to get experience in related fields with more immediate prospects for a paycheck. And when an internship at a publishing company proved that cubicle life was not part of my destiny, the other logical choice for an English major was to teach.

So on my first day of teaching for a summer reading program after that first year of grad school arrived, I was prepared. I knew the content. I was confident in my ability to share my love of reading and reading skills. And I knew I could be a successful teacher. I knew I could do a good job. But that knowledge didn't affect my fear. My head and my mind were on board, that this had to work and I knew I could do it, but my body still had reservations.

Every morning – every morning – that first week of school, I would get up. I would vomit. Then I would get in the car. And in the car I would pray. I would say,

“God, I want you to have all of me, good and bad. And I ask that you remove from me every single defect of character that stands in the way of my usefulness to you and my fellows. And I ask that you give me the strength as I go out from here to do Your bidding. Thy will, not mine, be done.”

That helped me to accept my nerves and my anxiety as well as my confidence, as apparently [they were] all things that I needed to get through the day. And giving God responsibility kind of helped reduce my anxiety over things I couldn't control.

After I graduated a got a job teaching English and speech, of all things, at a local vocational for-profit college. This is where I did not take a risk. On the ballot In November 2008 in California was Proposition 8 which was to limit who could get married to whom. And asked the people of the state to judge to judge my life and my relationship with the woman I loved. And the thing was that when the student in my class talked about the obscene attack ads, I could not speak up. I was scared. This wasn't about material that I had studied; this was *me*. I knew that if I had that discussion I would have to be clear and confident in who I was and what the proposition was and wasn't. And I knew that I couldn't put myself out there to be scrutinized by my students.

But there is a happy ending to this tale of risk.

Not four years later we moved up to Seattle. Our first son Evan was two, and Vanessa was pregnant with our second son Liam, and Referendum 74 was on the November 2012 ballot. This time around when marriage equality was up for a vote, I had a lot more to protect. It was one thing to let my fear consume my voice when I was in a new job and new to public speaking. But now I was a mama bear.

After living the experience of four years earlier and watching the TV as the votes to deny equality arose to the point that it would win, after living through all the tiny little bureaucratic reminders that our family wasn't quite equal to other families, I *knew* I had to do everything I could to raise my voice, so that no matter what the outcome of the vote, at least I could say I gave my cause everything I had in me. And so I volunteered to tell my story -- our family story -- at coffee shops.

This was a risk that I had to take because the consequences of not speaking up, of letting my body's natural reaction or my fear of being seen or judged were far outweighed by my *need* to be seen and heard and understood. I was armed with my truth. And just like Jesus told his brothers, I knew I was doing the right thing by telling my story of love, and, if someone had a problem with that -- thankfully I didn't have to confront hostility -- I was ready to shake the dust off of their opinion off my shoes. Because even when the instincts of my body tell me to hide and shake with fear, I have tapped into a power that is so much bigger than me, but still a part of me, that can speak to my head and my heart and dare me to try -- especially when it comes to protecting the people I love, and even today when maybe I can lend a little bit of courage to someone else who might be afraid to share his or her story.

John Worthington

In January of 1972, I was an associate pastor in a 1500-member congregation in a suburb of Los Angeles with the romantic name St. Peter's by the Sea. I had been ordained 7-1/2 years. My wife Barbara and I had three children: 5-1/2 and four and two. I had been considering that it was probably time to respond to a new call. Maybe, maybe I'd be a pastor in a similar affluent suburban congregation somewhere on the West Coast.

I was approached by a representative of a joint committee of the Presbytery of San Diego and the Southern California Conference of the United Church of Christ: Would I be interested in becoming the organizing pastor of a new church in a rapidly growing northern suburb of San Diego called Mira Mesa? The new congregation would be related both to the Presbyterians and to the United Church of Christ.

Mira Mesa in 1972 had about 10,000 residents. The 1970s census tracts for the area showed about a thousand folks. It was booming! It was 15 miles north of central San Diego in a strip of land that had been annexed to the city so that an affluent community to the north and the Wild Animal Park for the San Diego Zoo could be included in the city limits of San Diego. It was cut off to the south from the rest of the city by the Miramar Naval Air Station. The undeveloped land was rocky clay covered in sagebrush and inhabited by those 10,000 folks and by rabbits and snakes and coyotes.

Well, in the way these things unfold, I expressed some interest, and they called back. And I said a little more; then they called back. And a little more, and somebody came to visit, and a little more. Anyway eventually Barbara and I went to San Diego to meet with, of course, a committee and to be taken on a tour of what was to be Mira Mesa. We learned that the real estate developers, in order to secure building permits, had promised the City of San Diego and the San Diego School District to make vacant houses available for civic buildings and for elementary schools. Middle school and high school kids were going to be bussed out of the community about, mm, 15 miles down the freeway. There was one fire station. There was one post office in a little travel trailer at the end of a dirt road sitting on an abandoned airstrip that the Navy had given up at the end of World War II. There was a grocery store. There were two gas stations. There were three Christian communities: Roman Catholic, Southern Baptist, Missouri Synod Lutheran. The only access to the community was a four-lane boulevard that was an exit off I-15 to the east and that went west across the Mesa and dead-ended about 2 miles out into dirt and sage brush.

Barbara and I talked. And we spent some time in Mira Mesa without the committee -- that's very helpful to do. And we talked and we prayed and we talked some more. I asked St. Peter's whether my position might be upgraded to co-pastor? That had been kicked around a bit. ... No. ... We told the committee in San Diego the salary that it was offering was not enough for five people to live on. It raised the salary to what we asked for.

So in the summer of 1972 we sold our house in Los Angeles and we moved into a house in Mira Mesa, looking for something that we thought might work for whatever it was we were going to do. Five of us and one dog. The two oldest kids were there, ready to start school -- not in the community but being driven 12 miles one way out to a school down in San Diego. We were leaving friendships behind, a settled life -- very comfortable. And headed into the unknown. Barbara, driving the kids to San Diego, told me years later that she had cried all the way down the 80 miles.

We discovered when we got there that there *were* no "civic places" where a congregation might gather. Nothing. Unless you wanted to meet in the parking lot of the grocery store before it opened on Sunday morning. So on World Communion Sunday in 1972 we opened up our home to the people that we had started to gather together. My mother-in-law did childcare for the youngest people who came in one of our spare bedrooms. We celebrated the Lord's Supper -- a major issue to get Congregationalists and Presbyterians to agree how that was going to happen. But we did. We celebrated the Lords Supper. And the United Church of Mira Mesa was launched.

I was so scared. There isn't even a word. I told Peter that in times like those, you don't quite know what you're doing, except that at the time it is the only thing to do. Barbara and I did ministry there together, and that church is still a beneficiary of her ministry there. I learned that faithfully traveling with Jesus Christ isn't about knowing and believing a lot of things and spilling that all back. It is about trusting Christ's promise to be with us in the traveling. The last few Sundays we've been singing a

hymn as the children go off to Sunday school, and the last verse of that has been for me a description of what that time was like.

I am going on a journey / And welcome companions,
But don't ask me how we will survive or where we will go,
Or who will come with us / Or what we'll be doing.
Just join me in trav'ling / And learn all that I know." ²

And so we traveled and went on an amazing adventure.

Loyce Ong'udi

Peter came and met with me and asked me these three questions: Loyce, what was the riskiest thing that you have ever undertaken? Why did you take that risk? And how has that risk change you? My first response to Peter was that, "Peter, my life has always been full of risks."

But I'm going to share with you one of those risk that is completely changed me. On October 22, 1996 -- which also happens to be my birthday -- I arrived in Sacramento as a legal immigrant to join my ex-husband. Less than three years later, on September 27, 1999 at 6 PM I was in Seattle in Jack-in-the-Box here on 50th Ave. with my daughter Audrey. That, Peter, was the most difficult experience I have ever had. Getting into an aeroplane for that short flight to Seattle, as a foreigner with *no single documentation* to identify myself, because I had lost all that to domestic abuse. The only person that I knew was my daughter Audrey. And the only other information I had was a piece of paper with somebody's name and a phone number. I'd never even heard of Seattle before I landed at the Jack-in-the-Box that night.

But why did I take this risk?

First as I mentioned, I was escaping that severe domestic abuse. But even most importantly, all was because of my concern for my child. You see, we arrived in October, and sooner or later I looked for a church and a church family and I joined a UCC church. My daughter loved going to UCC. And so eight months later she went to Camp Cazadero in Sonoma County. -- You see when you come from Kenya out from Africa you don't have any idea about racism. -- So, as I dropped my child, the last word I told her -- which was also her eighth birthday -- "Honey don't call home," because I knew she was going to be so tempted to call home, because this was the first time she had stayed overnight without me. She was going for one week. So Audrey didn't call.

So when she came back to Sacramento, she never went back to church again. Neither did she want to go to [school?]. [As was our custom] before camp, she always woke me up early in the morning. And she wouldn't say why she wouldn't go back to church.

Well now coupled domestic abuse, I was really struggling for things that I had no control over. So months later when I asked her, she told me that when she got into the swimming pool, all the white children, got out. And in the cabin they moved out from the room; they wouldn't sleep with her in the same room. And that during the dining table all the children stayed away close from her. And can you imagine a *parent's pain* not knowing how to name what my child was going through. So I did not

² "Oh Where Are You Going" by Graham Maule & John Bell. ©1987, WGRG, Iona Community.

want to raise my child in the place which should have been our refuge from domestic abuse, toxic in the church and toxic at home. So I decided to move to Seattle.

How did I find Seattle?

I managed to whisper what I was going through to a member of our church that I'd started to know. Mark you, we had only been in Sacramento for eight months. And women don't formally share that domestic abuse; it is the most embarrassing thing that you'd ever want to share with anybody. It's embarrassing for me to even share this with you. That woman -- the only thing I knew to ask for, since racism was a new vocabulary for me, I told her I wanted her to help us find a place where my child's *skin* would not determine how she hangs with friends and that, because of that, she could live to her God-given potential. So Seattle's name came up. And they started calling around to various churches in Seattle. And there was one rejection after the other because, as the woman said, "It is a black family." And then the question was, "How long are they going to be around us?" And the response was, "We don't know how long." "We are sorry. We can't have them." Finally the caller found, Oh! My God, Gail Crouch. And Gail Crouch said "yes" to a stranger with open heart and open arms. And that's how we landed at Jack-in-the-Box. And that name on a piece of paper was Gail Crouch's name.

She organized very quickly for us to find a place of refuge. She organized for us to get into New Beginnings. After a week Gail was retiring, and it was her last month when we came into Seattle. So she handed is over for ongoing love and care, the same unconditional love, to Barbara Peterson. Barbara continued to love us with no questions asked.

But you know nobody wants to stay a homeless woman. I had never rented a house since I arrived in the United States three years ago. I did not even *know* what I didn't know! You know, that to ask the questions that would eventually help me. The only phone number of a person that I knew cared enough was Gail. So she was actually ill in hospital. I started hunting for her. And do you know that within that week that Gail was retiring, Sortun Court was being inspected to be handed over to the charge and Gary Sortun was still alive.

And I went for that opening. It wasn't even rated you for renting. And I pleaded with Gail, and she helped us to get into Sortun Court. We were the first tenants, who were given the model house to live in, even before anybody moved into Sortun Court, of course. We lived in Sortun Court for 10 years where I raised my child.

So how has that changed me?

I am here telling my story. Several months ago -- maybe two months ago -- I preached with Catherine and I mentioned about you being the only family I know here. There were some people who thought maybe that story was too much. I thought I would complete it so that you understand when I say you are the *only* family that I have here and how you became the family that I have here, because I started as a homeless woman. It's changed me. Gail helped to move me from the woman was being described as a homeless woman to a woman with a key. She changed my trajectory. She changed *Audrey's* trajectory.

And finally, it made me open my heart to a stranger and love a stranger when they themselves feel unloved -- because at that point when Gail loved us, I did not feel loveable, because I was moving away from domestic abuse. She made me look at myself in a different manner. And I made a promise

to Loyce *privately* -- and today I will tell Gail this, because I've never told her -- I made a promise, Gail, that someday and always I will love a stranger unconditionally and pay it forward, because there are no sufficient words to thank you. And I thank you members of this family for making me feel a part of you and feel welcome and feel somebody and not a stranger and welcoming other strangers just, as we begin to welcome homeless women this month.*

For all the stories that we've shared today and for the risks that we may take today and always moving forward, may those transform us all together as a family, and we say amen.

UCUCC: ELG, JW, JO, & PI

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