

November 13, 2005  
Judges 4:1-7, Matthew 25:14-30  
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**“Risky Business”**

If I gave you an artist's brush, canvas and paint, how would you picture God? Would God become an ancient, bearded fellow with eyes that are forever young as the God William Blake drew? Perhaps you would prefer a camera so that you could capture a picture of a family sharing their food with a stranger, or a scene of armies laying down their weapons, or panoramic view of the Painted Desert. You would say, "I wasn't quick enough to snap one of God, but these are places God has been." Maybe you would prefer a pen so that you could write a poem to give some impression of God.

Some of you might say, "I'm not good with painting or photography or poetry, but let me tell you a story." You would tell a story to paint a picture of God. Jesus did that. Jesus told stories about God's ways so that we would know who God is and what God is like. These stories about God are also stories about us - who we are and who God wants us to be.

Once Jesus told a story about a master who went away on a long trip and entrusted his property to three servants. To the first he gave five talents; to the second he gave two; and to the third he gave one. In that day, a talent was a huge sum of money. A person would have had to work twenty years to gain a whole talent of gold. When the master left, the first two servants got busy investing the money. The third servant buried his talent in a hole because he was afraid to lose what he had. When the master returned, he called for an accounting of his property. He praised and rewarded the first two servants for their effort and faithfulness. The master condemned the third servant. The servant's fear led him to do nothing with the gifts the master had entrusted to his care. What little he had was taken away and given to those who would do something with the gift.

All three servants had a picture of the master in their minds. Their image of the master determined what they did and what they did not do. Although Jesus does not tell us what the first two servants thought, apparently they had some picture in their minds of their master's character and will. Even when the master was absent, they knew what he would want them to do. The third servant blurts out his mistaken notions about the master, "Master I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not winnow; so I was afraid and I went and hid your talent in the ground." The servant has the wrong image of the master in his mind. He does not know what to do, because he really does not know his master.

Sometimes people get the wrong idea about God in their minds. How we think of God determines how we live. If we think of God as the protector of my family, my race, my class or my nation to the exclusion of others, then we will worship a narrow God of our own making, whose main purpose is to smooth out the rough spots of my life and to prop up my prejudices. If we think of God as a "super judge" who executes judgment without mercy on those who break the law, then we think that the whole object of life is to live by

the letter of law. Woe be unto those who transgress our understanding of what is right and what is wrong! Life becomes a matter of keeping score and nursing old wounds. We fall into the self-deluded, frightening world of self-righteousness. In Victor Hugo's epic novel *Les Misérables*, police inspector Javert is a man who lives by the law in a world without mercy. He dedicates his life to capturing Jean Valjean, who has violated the terms of his parole and escaped Javert's clutches. Nothing is more important in Javert's moral universe than returning the good and beneficent Valjean to justice. In the end, Inspector Javert's distorted image of God leads to Javert's own destruction.

Too easily, we fall into living in a world without mercy. If we think of God as an unpredictable, temperamental character or a "hard bargainer," then we will be afraid to take any chances with the gifts God has given us. We can become obsessed with not making mistakes and never taking chances. There are people who never sing for fear of sounding foolish, who do not dance for fear of looking dumb and who never learn to swim for fear of sinking. We can be consumed with fear of failure. Do you remember the line in the popular song, "The Rose," that says, "It's the soul afraid of dying that never learns to live?" If we do not risk using what God has given us, what we have will be taken away from us in the end.

Henry James's short story, *The Beast in the Jungle*, is about a man who feels he has been called to some great destiny. He is convinced that it is necessary for him to save himself for this special purpose. He does not live with any intimacy or vital connection with others. He feels he must keep himself ready for his moment of greatness when it comes. He is so afraid of missing the great purpose of his life that he rejects the affection of the woman who loves him. In the end, he misses out on life altogether. By saving himself for some heroic purpose, he fails to take the risk of becoming involved in everyday life and ordinary relationships with others. He is the soul who "never learns to live."

The stories of the Bible paint a vivid picture of a God who is constantly taking risks. The Bible opens with God creating the universe and God creating human beings in God's image. God takes the risk of giving freedom to Adam and Eve. The wonderful and terrifying gift of freedom means that human beings will have the capacity to reject God's love and turn from God. God takes a risk when God calls a special people as his own people so that the whole world will know God through them.

There were times when God regretted the whole business. God's love and grace transformed God's disappointment and anger. When the people were oppressed, God raised up leaders like Deborah who were willing to take the risk of following God. Deborah was a judge in Israel who functioned as a prophetess and military leader. She gave instructions to Barak to raise an army to fight Sisera, who was the general of the Canaanite army. Barak refused to go into battle unless Deborah would go with him. Confident in God's promises, Deborah went with him and the Canaanite army was defeated. When everyone else was afraid and thought the situation was hopeless, Deborah was faithful and took the lead against all odds.

God took a risk when God entered the world in Jesus Christ to live as one of us and bear our sins. God took the risk of allowing the pain and possibilities of being human to enter

the divine heart. It is the nature of God to take risk of giving, loving and forgiving. If God takes such risks for us, then we are to take risks for God. If we ever think that forgiving someone, loving someone, sacrificing for someone in need or caring for a stranger is not risk, then all we have to do is look at the cross.

I hold in my heart a personal dream for our congregation. I dream that we will be a congregation in which we are each engaged in one helping relationship with another person or group outside of our normal circle of family and friends. When we step beyond ourselves, we meet God - who is always ahead of us. In meeting God, we rediscover our true selves.

In faithfulness to God, this congregation is taking risks. Two years ago, in the midst of pastoral transition, our congregation took the risk of building a new facility for our youth, our missions program, our ministry of music, our congregational fellowship and community events.

The consultants, who knew the difficulty of undertaking such an endeavor in the midst of pastoral transition, had previously advised against it.

This congregation weighed the costs, accepted the risks and acted decisively to provide for God's mission and ministry. Soon, we will have a facility that will be used every day to extend the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This year, the Rev. David Berry, our Associate Pastor for Missions, had a dream of working together with Christians, Jews and Muslims to build a Habitat for Humanity House as an act of witness and peacemaking. When groups in the community began to complain about the divisions and misunderstanding among these three faith traditions, David said it was time to take a risk and do something about it. From his dream, the idea of building an "Abraham House" has emerged. Now Muslim, Christian and Jewish congregations and groups within the community are committing to building this house together next summer, when students from Mar Elias University in Israel are here studying at the University of Indianapolis. All this becomes possible because someone is willing to take a risk.

There are many other ways in which the members of our congregation are taking risks for God. Members of our church family are working with the deacons and the new Westminster Neighborhood Ministries Board to establish a pre-school for at-risk children in the Westminster neighborhood. We already support an after-school program and a summer program; but some of our members realize that, if we are going to help these children and their families have greater opportunities and greater success in school, then we need to begin earlier. Someone has a dream; someone is counting the costs; someone is willing to take a risk.

Fourteen years ago, one of our members told Dr. Ray Bowden that he wanted to serve in some capacity in the church. This member said he was willing to do the toughest job, the one nobody else wanted. Dr. Bowden came back to him and said, "How would you like to teach Sunday school for Middlers?" This member thought that he didn't know how to do it,

but he had volunteered, so he did it. He was willing to take a risk. Fourteen years later, he is still teaching the Middlers and calls it the highlight of his week. Some of those former Middlers are now in their thirties and they still stay in touch with this special man.

This weekend, the Indianapolis Great Banquet is hosting a women's weekend here at Second Presbyterian Church. Forty-nine women have accepted the invitation of friends to be our guests for a three day spiritual retreat. It is a risk to spend three days sleeping on cots, sharing thoughts, feelings and struggles with strangers, and being willing to open up your life in faith. They are willing to take a risk.

Last Sunday, we celebrated Dedication Sunday. It was not a day simply to fill out a card saying what we are giving to the church. It was a day to ask ourselves if we are willing to take a risk for Christ's kingdom - to give ourselves to some cause or service greater than our selves, to commit our lives to encountering God in worship and study, and to give ourselves in service to Christ by serving others. God has given each one of us a talent to use!

What are you doing with the gifts God has given you? Your capacity to love? Your capacity to give? Your capacity to encourage others? Your capacity to serve? Discipleship is a risky business. We cannot be content with where we have been, with what we have done before, or with who we are now. God has taken great risks to love us. God has given us a brush, a canvas, and paint. God has given us a picture to take. God has given us words to use to tell a story or write a poem. God has given us life. Our lives are to become a painting, a poem, a picture, or a story of this God who risks everything on the cross to redeem the world.