

1 Sermon, March 3, 2013

Texts: Mark 3:1-6, Matthew 13:44-46

Title: "Why Christianity is Odd: Risk Rather than Rules"

How many of you are parents?

That's most of the congregation.

And how many times did you pray that your children would be safe?

That's the normal thing for a parent to do.

But there also comes a point where parents want their children to take risks. Not bungee-jumping or sky diving, maybe – but a risk that could really bear fruit.

Speaking in public, a job that's a stretch, a sport that they can learn from — some kind of risk.

Jesus is like that parent that wants us to take a risk, to step out of our comfort zone — and do good.

In his earthly ministry, Jesus didn't offer a lot of comfort. He said, "Foxes have holes, birds have their nests, but the son of man has no place to rest his head."

That means, if you follow me, it's going to be uncomfortable. You won't have a predictable life.

Jesus offered abundance, and understanding, and acceptance and companionship (all good and warm things) — but not a lot of comfort.

Religion is supposed to offer us comfort. Religion is supposed to be a framework that helps everything make sense. Religion is supposed to make life easier to cope with.

Buddhism does that. It's about avoiding suffering, simplifying your wants.

Hinduism offers comfort. It tells you that everything is interrelated and has a purpose, and you are to fulfill your place in the universe.

Islam offers comfort. If you pray five times daily, fast during Ramadan, give five percent of your wealth — those things add order and steadiness to your life.

Consumerism, the world's greatest religion, is about comfort and pleasure, not about risk.

But following Jesus offers us risk, instead. I don't like it. I don't do that well with risk. I can stand a certain amount, but then I want to retreat back into the comfort of the familiar.

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Jesus told us that the Kingdom of God is like a treasure hidden in a field: A treasure that you stumble upon and then cover up and then go and sell everything you have to buy the field.

It sounds unethical, doesn't it? That's why the parable shocks us into thinking about what would be so valuable that you'd risk prosecution if someone found out about it.

This is a lot of risk. Not only are you selling everything you own, but you're doing something under cover of darkness so you can get the treasure out without someone finding out it really belonged to the previous owner.

What could be that valuable? What kind of treasure is that?

Or, Jesus said, the Kingdom of God is like a single pearl that is so valuable, that, on realizing its value, you sell everything you have to buy it. That's risk, too. What are you going to do with that pearl after you've sold everything you own?

The poet, Maya Angelou, wrote in *Wouldn't Take Nothing For My Journey Now* about her grandmother, an extraordinary woman. She married three times, bore two sons and single-handedly built her own business. Annie Henderson was the proprietor of the only general store in the Black community, no mean feat for a woman, especially a barely literate Black woman in that place and time. That store was the result of years of hard labor cooking and selling food to the cotton and sawmill workers, and a shrewd business instinct.

Maya Angelou wrote of her grandmother:

One of my earliest memories of . . . my grandmother, is a glimpse of a tall cinnamon-colored woman with a deep, soft voice, standing thousands of feet up in the air on nothing visible. That incredible vision was the result of what my imagination would do each time Mamma drew herself up to her full six feet, clasped her hands behind her back, looked up into the distant sky, and said "I will step out on the word of God."

—Maya Angelou, *Wouldn't Take Nothing For My Journey Now*, Random House, 1993

I will step out on the word of God. There's an image of risk. But that's what Jesus was constantly doing. That's what Jesus was teaching us to do.

Jesus was continually fighting the religious establishment, which believed in rules rather than risk. Today's first gospel reading is about a time when Jesus was in the synagogue, and the religious authorities

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were watching him carefully for some slip-up, something to get Jesus back into line. The most likely slip-up was a violation of the Sabbath, like healing on the Sabbath when you weren't supposed to do any work.

But Jesus took the risk. He said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?"

They didn't answer Jesus. So Jesus looked around at them with anger – it should have been a no-brainer question to answer. They should have just said, "it's lawful to do good, not harm." But they were avoiding answering the question in order to trap him.

Jesus took the risk. He healed the man anyway. It was one more thing the religious leaders could hold against him.

Today we come to the table of the Lord's Supper. It is the sacrament we have that offers us comfort and rest and peace. But it helps us remember a moment in Jesus' life that was anything but comfort and rest and peace. It takes us to a moment when Jesus was at table with his best friends, telling them he was going to die. It was a moment when Jesus clearly saw what was ahead, and he could have run away.

But he chose to take the risk.

As we take comfort from this sacrament, where we remember that the risen Christ is with us now, let's think of Holy Communion as sustenance for the journey. A journey on which Christ will ask more from us.

Amen.

"Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him." Mark 3:1-6, NRSV.

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it." Matthew 13:44-46, NRSV.