

## MERIDIAN STREET UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

### Risk or Rust

Matthew 2:9

Risk or Rust – I must give all credit for the title of this sermon to the Rev. Scott Littlefield who services the First Congregational Church of Barrington in New Hampshire. I was looking up the word risk on the internet and came across his sermon title. I borrowed the title and I want to give him all the credit.

“It would be a lot easier to enjoy your life if there weren’t so many things trying to kill you every day.” Thus begins an article by Jeffrey Kluger from the December 4, 2006 issue of *Time* Magazine. He goes on to say, “There’s the fall out of bed that kills 600 Americans each year. There’s the early-morning heart attack, which is 40% more common than those that strike later in the day. There’s the fatal plunge down stairs, the bite of sausage that gets lodged in your throat, the tumble on the slippery sidewalk as you leave the house, the high-speed automotive pinball game that is your daily commute.”

This is just a portion of the first paragraph of the article and it is enough to make my anxiety and blood pressure rise. The focus of the article is risk and the human ability to measure the consequences of risk.

No news to any of us, we all know that risk is inherent in life. We take a risk each and every day when we get out of bed and start our daily routines. It is a miracle that any of us are here this morning! Certainly, there are those who crave the sensation of risk taking as they bungee-jump off bridges, or sky dive out of perfectly sound airplanes. There are those thrill seekers who take risks climbing to great heights on some of the world’s tallest mountains and others who dive to depths in the world’s deepest waters. This kind of risk is too much for me. I read about the great escapades of risk takers with awe and wonder, but last Sunday, the Colts game about gave me a coronary. I am not up to major risk taking of the thrill seekers.

I prefer to spend the bulk of my days trying to ensure that I will encounter the least amount of risk possible. As if, by living very carefully, one can be sheltered from the unexpected. Over time, one can live in such a cautious manner that risk falls out of their vocabulary and their life experience. It is this reality that I would like to explore with you this morning.

Again, from the *Time* Magazine article, these words: “Shadowed by peril as we are, you would think we’d get pretty good at distinguishing the risks likeliest to do us in from the ones that are statistical long shots. But, you would be wrong. We agonize over avian flu, which to date has killed precisely no one in the U.S., but have to be cajoled into getting vaccinated for the common flu, which contributes to the deaths of 36,000 Americans each year. We wring our hands over the mad cow pathogen that might be (but almost certainly isn’t) in our hamburger and worry far less about the cholesterol that contributes to the heart disease that kills 700,000 of us annually. We pride ourselves on being the only species that understands the concept of risk, yet we have a confounding habit of worrying about mere possibilities while ignoring

probabilities, building barricades against exposed to real ones.”

perceived dangers while leaving ourselves

How do we find the balance between taking healthy risks that cause us to learn and grow or avoiding risk at all and allow ourselves to rust from the inside out?

## Prayer

We are basically using the same brain function that we have used since the beginning of time. I am fascinated by the function of the amygdala (a-myg-da-la emphasis on the myg) within the brain. In his book the *Emotional Brain*, author Joseph LeDoux writes that the amygdala is, “the heart and soul of the fear system... When the amygdala is stimulated while a subject is awake not only is it possible to record the response that is elicited, but the subjects verbally report a commonly held experience - a sense of foreboding danger, of fear.” Taking care of fear responses seems to be one of the functions of the amygdala. “The function seems to have been established eons ago, probably at least since dinosaurs ruled the earth, and to have been maintained through diverse branches of evolutionary development.” There are scientists who claim that we are “emotional lizards.”

My lizard brain likes to play it safe, stick with what I know, avoid thrill seeking and risk taking. I find comfort in being comfortable. The only problem with this reality, is it offends God.

Scripture – the story that Tom/Bob read earlier about the three servants continues... “The servant given one thousand said, ‘Master, I know you have high standards and hate careless ways, that you demand the best and make no allowances for error. I was afraid I might disappoint you, so I found a good hiding place and secured your money. Here it is, safe and sound down to the last cent.’ The master was furious. ‘That’s a terrible way to live! It’s criminal to live cautiously like that! If you knew I was after the best, why did you do less than the least? The least you could have done would have been to invest the sum with the bankers, where at least I would have gotten a little interest. Take the thousand and give it to the one who risked the most. And get rid of this “play-it-safe” who won’t go out on a limb. Throw him out into utter darkness.’”

Harsh words! The servant in an effort to avoid pain or suffering hid the money. He did not go out and spend it foolishly, he did not leave it lying around to be stolen, and he took care of it. Not very imaginative true, but he remembered where he hid it and returned it to the rightful owner. Is he rewarded for his cautious, careful behavior? No – he must give the money to another and is cast out into the world.

I will be honest with you. This passage has been known to keep me up at night. I want life to be as painless as possible. I want to experience smooth sailing and gentle breezes. I love the concept of risk free living.

I understand the servant who hid the money. I understand why he wanted to play it safe. I understand that he did not want to disappoint. I understand why he was afraid to take a risk with the money and fail. Fear is a powerful emotion. Fear triggers the amygdala overwhelming us in an attempt to prevent using our reason to work through our fear.

His amygdala took over. He buried the money, probably worried incessantly that someone might find it and counted the days until the man owner returned.

Author Ellsworth Kalas speaks of this passage by saying, “On dark days of self-doubt (which are likely to be those days when I doubt the goodness of God), in times when weariness shuts out the sunlight of vigor and hope, or at times when I’ve simply lost heart, I bury the gold. Sadly, some people bury the gold for all their days – not because they’re bad or they hate God, but simply because they, like the timid soul in Jesus’ story, are afraid.”

Though I understand the fear of that servant, though I understand the fear that comes with taking a risk, we are people of faith and called to face our fears. If we allow our fear to overwhelm us we run another risk, a far greater risk, the risk of rusting from the inside out. The third servant, in my opinion, was rusting.

We follow a radical Jesus who encourages risk taking. Not the kind of risk where you jump out of an airplane, but the kind of risk where you venture out on a limb with just your faith and God’s grace. The kind of risk that takes you to places you would not choose to go, the kind of risk that connects you to people you might not otherwise know, the kind of risk that challenges long held assumptions with new thinking, the kind of risk that pushes you out of your comfort zone and offers you new experiences and growth.

Burying the treasures that God has given us, digging a hole to avoid risking new experiences is not in God’s dream for us. We are empowered by God’s grace, not to just sit in the dark and cherish our relationship with God, but to step out into the light and boldly proclaim the love of God. Hiding the relationship will reap nothing. Over time, focused solely on ourselves, we will begin to rust. A spirituality that includes only self and God is too narrow. The protestant tradition has taken the personal relationship with Jesus too far. It is personal yes, it is deeply profound, yes, but it is also communal. The relationship demands of us taking risk for love. Sharing openly, serving openly, and proclaiming openly.

All too often we settle for remaining in our comfort zone, taking no risks and keeping our faith to ourselves. What a wonderful day, the Sabbath, when we can gather, pull our faith out of the closet for an hour and share our faith openly with each other.

What was the last risk you took for your faith? Where did you go? Who did you see? What did you do? Risk comes in different sizes and shapes. What is a great risk for one, is daily practice for another.

When I grow timid, when I grow afraid, when I play it safe with my faith, I begin the rusting process. It is difficult for others to see the rust because it is a process that takes place deep within. For me, it tends to start with self centeredness leaning into my own will rather than God’s grace. For me, rusting is a process of getting in a familiar rut and staying there. It means staying in the safe zone. Yet inside, I find my thoughts are less faith centered and more self centered. Random flickers of judgment of others passes through my consciousness. Occupation with my own agenda becomes a detriment to my serving others.

Rusting on the inside gives us twinges of pain with stabs of guilt, hardness of heart and less and less mobility. Rusting causes us to have less courage in our living and ultimately our faith shrinks. Rusting makes us less. Risking, challenging, growing in Christ makes us more. We are the disciples of Christ, given an abundance of blessing and called to build upon those blessings as we share them with others.

What is your next step in discipleship, the next risk you are ready to take for your faith? It may take you to far away places or keep you right at home. It may mean a mission trip or healing a broken relationship in your own family. It may mean serving in Africa or just down the street at Fletcher Place.

Several years ago, my darling daughter talked me into going parasailing with her. I wanted to please her, but I am afraid of heights. I am afraid to ride down an escalator much less parasail. We decided to go the next day and I slept fitfully all night long. My fear kept me awake. The day of our adventure, I came up with several excuses that I thought were sound obstacles to our plan, but Lori was not to be discouraged. So, we went to the beach, paid our money and waited for our turn. I grew more afraid by the minute. Finally, we got on the boat and headed out into the beautiful waters of Lake Tahoe. Lori and I climbed into the harness that would carry us into the skies and slowly the cable was released. We climbed higher and higher. I closed my eyes on the way up. I was shaking I was so afraid. Finally, the cable stopped and we were flying high. Lori turned to me and said, "Mom, open your eyes." First I prayed then I opened my eyes and was stunned by the beauty of the moment. I almost missed that moment because of my fear. It became for me a holy experience, an encounter with the Divine and a memory that will last with me forever. We flew over Lake Tahoe tied to a boat. We soared above like birds, taking in the sunlight, the water, the mountains and the majesty. It was as close to heaven as I have ever been.

My amygdala almost had the best of me. Fortunately for me, my daughter is far less fearful than her mother.

I don't want to live a life so safe that I rust. It is in taking the risk that we grow. It is in living our values that we grow in grace and grow in faith. Time after time, we find in scripture those who take a risk and find it a blessing. There is cost, there is often loss, but it is the risk that keeps faith alive.

Coach Tony Dungy thanked God after the playoff game last Sunday. I am not sure that he and I share the same theology, but he consistently speaks of his faith openly. I can imagine that there are those who criticize him. I can imagine there are those who belittle him. But, Dungy continues to go out on a limb with his faith and God's grace and reminds all of us, that being faithful takes courage. Being faithful honors God this day and everyday.

There were three servants. Two had the courage to take their blessing and build upon it. One was afraid and buried his potential. This is the day that God has given us. May we be willing to take risks in our faith journey for the One who has risked it all for us.