

## “Risky Business”

### **Matthew 5: 7**

<sup>7</sup> *"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy."*

### **Luke 15:1-7**

*Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. <sup>2</sup> And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." <sup>3</sup> So he told them this parable: <sup>4</sup> "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? <sup>5</sup> When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. <sup>6</sup> And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' <sup>7</sup> Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance*

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I am not a person who particularly likes to take a risk, in fact I'd say that I'm actually the pretty risk-averse type. I value safety and structures that are put in place to prevent unforeseen calamities. Bungee jumping or sky diving, those don't appeal to me at all; but triple harnessed car seats a well-stocked closet of emergency supplies do. I wouldn't be a good venture capitalist or contestant on "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire," mainly because I'd be reluctant to take the risk for greater prizes and instead choose a guaranteed outcome even if it's not much. It would be pretty boring to watch me gamble because I'd be planted over by the penny slot machines.

Yes, I'm a risk-averse person and some might say perhaps that's how I ended up in the Presbyterian Church! As Presbyterians, we have a Book of Order that we rely on to prevent chaos, and as a denomination we value doing things decently and in order. We have enough committees and processes to make sure that we never do anything rashly, and if we ever think of taking a risk or chance on something, we appoint Task Forces and commissions to slow things down enough so we at least feel like we're playing it safe. Yes, the Presbyterian culture in many ways suits my risk-averse personality.

Today's scripture lessons have something to say to us though about this tendency. It is the Season of Lent and we are invited to lay down our usual ways of approaching life, to take a risk by going out into the wilderness as Jesus did for forty days. It is in the desert that we are stripped of our defenses and normal routines which give us the illusion of control. We are confronted by a God who is unencumbered by our logical procedures, our safety mechanisms, and our attempts to manage everything in a neat and systematic way; instead, God challenges us to take a risk—to be changed and wholly transformed. It is costly and indeed somewhat scary because we don't know what the outcome will be.

Jesus had a way of leading people to these wilderness places through well-timed stories. The parable of the lost sheep comes to us in the Gospel of Luke, and it is a challenging story for those of us who are risk-averse. It is Jesus' response to the Pharisees, the religious elite and teachers in the Jewish community, and some would say a risk-averse group. The Pharisees had developed a system of religious living and they prided themselves on having figured out exactly how things were to be done to avoid any unanticipated outcomes. For this reason, they took offense at Jesus' practice of hosting sinners and tax collectors to dinner because it fell way outside of their accepted structures. They were alarmed at his risky behavior, and felt that his actions brought shame upon the identity of religious teachers.

It is in this context that Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep. It is a short story, and he says it so matter-of-factly that we might miss the radical message. *“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?”*

We want to automatically respond, “Of course Jesus, who wouldn't do that?” Well actually, being the risk-averse person that I am, when I get to thinking about the situation, losing one sheep and ensuring the safety of the ninety-nine others seems like the better of the two choices to me. Sure I'd miss that one little lamb, but how could I live with myself if some hungry wolf came along and ate a third of my flock while I was off searching for that errant lamb? The risk of going after that one sheep seems to outweigh the possible costs, and so if it were up to me, I think I'd stay with the ninety-nine because at least I would be able to keep watch over them.

That's not how the parable goes though, as the shepherd not only leaves the other sheep in the wilderness, but also puts himself at risk by going out alone to find the one who has wandered off. There is no guarantee he will find it, and he actually might even come across a wild animal that will threaten his own life as well. Now to follow the thread of that possibility eventually leads to the death of the lost sheep and the shepherd, and the likely harm to the rest of the flock to top it all off. For all those who are risk-averse, the option of going after the one lost sheep does not really seem like an option at all.

Parables, however, don't operate within the usual ways of doing things. The shepherd does go after the lost sheep and it is with great joy that he finds it. It doesn't end there as he must lift the disoriented creature onto his own shoulders and make the long journey back to the others,

no doubt a very heavy burden. At the end of this long journey he calls together his friends and neighbors to rejoice with him, such is his happiness at recovering his lost lamb. He has taken a great risk, but his reward is great as well.

Still, in my mind I would have preferred to have stuck with the ninety-nine and let the one go. The risk to me seems too big. I would rather be surer of my surroundings and situation than head out into the wilderness for unknown consequences, good or bad.

And it is here that our other scripture lesson from the Gospel of Matthew comes to mind. *“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”* This shepherd certainly fulfills the definition of being merciful. If it had been up to me, I would have said that since the sheep was dumb enough to wander off in the first place, then it would just have to deal with the consequences, though I’d hope for the best, maybe say a prayer or two for it. The shepherd, however, extends mercy beyond reason. His love is radical and it never occurs to him that maybe he should just cut his losses.

This leads me to a question: what is it that stops us from extending mercy? Jesus tells us that we will be blessed, happy, if we are merciful and that we too will receive mercy. But so much of the time we operate in a merciless world and we are inclined to respond mercilessly too. Why is it that we have such a difficult time following after the example of the merciful shepherd?

There are several reasons I think—one is our sense of fairness. We are people who are very concerned about things being fair and equal. We go to enormous lengths to set up systems which evaluate and keep score so we know what to do when a situation arises. We depend on precedent and comparison to make decisions about how to proceed. From our legal system to our companies, to our schools and our personal lives, we find ways to assess circumstances and people to standards of what we think constitutes fairness.

It’s not just about fairness though. Our more selfish interests lead us to wonder if we’ll be taken advantage of or lose out because we choose to extend mercy. We might also be afraid of not being able to control a situation or person if we stray outside our known ways. And then there is the concern that the mercy we give will be wasted or unappreciated and therefore not worth the gamble. Mercy does not fit well into the elaborate systems and structures we’ve created for ourselves and society because it doesn’t balance out.

With this mentality, we might approach the situation Jesus laid out in the parable this way: “Hmm, that lost sheep? Let’s see now, this isn’t his first time wandering off, in fact it’s his third and he still hasn’t learned his lesson. Plus he doesn’t get along with many members of the flock and he’s a liability to the rest of us. The best thing to do is to move on because he’s had his chances. After all, it’s not fair to the rest of the flock!”

Now imagine if instead, we chose to act in the ways of the shepherd. In this month of March Madness, with college basketball dominating many people’s minds, could you just see players telling the referee, “No, no, no, he didn’t really foul me; I don’t have to take the free throw.” That would probably throw many coaches and fans into a frenzy, and ensuing chaos would certainly follow. On the other hand, if Brad Stevens, the young coach of the Butler Bulldogs, had said to Bo Ryan on Thursday night during the game, “You know, you’ve had a lousy 11 minute run scoring practically nothing, why don’t we add an extra ten minutes to the game?” you can bet Badger fans would have been rejoicing at the second chance to make a rally and comeback in what was a pretty dismal game!

Mercy is a risky business. It messes with our systems of fairness and can often propel us into confusion because it upends our understanding of how things are supposed to work. This was the Pharisees’ complaint against Jesus; he was undermining the social order that they had worked hard to implement and understand. In effect, he was chucking out their well-thought out handbook and bringing disarray to an organized, though perhaps unjust, way of running things. When Jesus hosted the sinners and tax collectors at his table, he was working outside of the structures that the religious elite had set up. He was challenging them, these risk-averse and tightly controlled religious folks, to let go of their old systems. Mercy here meant letting go and opening up to new possibilities and ways of doing things.

In the season of Lent, Jesus invites us into the wilderness so that we can step away from our habitual ways of living. After we travel awhile in the desert, we start to recognize that the standards we operate by are just illusions which we hold onto. In the silence and solitude, we are able to recognize and appreciate more the mercy extended to us in the occasional oasis of water or shade of a tree. And it is there that we begin to be able to let go, to extend mercy, both to ourselves and also to others.

As we release the ideologies, theologies, and worldviews that can sometimes become our prison, we are freed to receive a creative new word from God. In letting go, we invite the Holy

Spirit to teach us anew what God desires for us; often there is a chance that it will lead to turmoil because it means we will be pushed to change our ways. Being merciful opens us up to possibilities that we could not see before because we had been holding our hands so tight to protect ourselves within the structures we have worked hard to build.

Jesus, after spending much time alone in the wilderness, instituted a new social order which surprised everyone, not just the Pharisees. The time in the desert prepared him to cast a vision for the kingdom of God. In letting go of the expectations which surrounded him from all sides, he also was able to offer mercy where no one anticipated compassion to be given. Being merciful, which here meant letting go of the assumed and proper ways of doing things, led to the discovery and recovery of people. Mercy ultimately resulted in repentance and joy.

It is a challenging notion for those of us who are risk-averse. We are not easily inclined to let go of our safety structures which are familiar and known. But we worship a God who is merciful and takes enormous risks, one might even say reckless action on our behalf. If we look ahead to the coming weeks in this Lenten season, we know how the story goes. But those who were with Jesus back then, could not foresee where the risky road would take him.

Letting go of the usual ways for Jesus meant infuriating many of the religious elite, such as the Pharisees. His abundance of mercy eventually instigated an angry mob to arrest him, caused his followers to desert him, and then brought about his crucifixion on the cross. Even Jesus in that moment, would cry out to God and wonder where this act of mercy would leave him. But it was this gracious act of letting go, of forgiveness, that would finally put to death a system that no longer worked. And it made room for something new to happen, a resurrection and hope for the world.

As we continue in this Lenten journey which traces the footsteps to the cross and the empty tomb, we too are invited to let go. Yes, it is risky business to follow this good shepherd and it will likely mean chaos, but it also brings with it the opportunity for great joy as we open ourselves to God's work in our lives. And we are reminded that this mercy begets more mercy, as the beatitude says, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy." We worship a God risks everything to free us, so that we too can let go and spread mercy throughout the world. Thanks be to God!