

First Presbyterian Church  
Life Lessons from Luke: Risking  
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2 Kings 9:1-3; Luke 8:27-39

You can see it on their faces. They are doing a risk versus reward calculation. They are trying to determine how much they will wager. Will it be a little or a lot? It often depends on whether they are ahead or behind, on how much they are ahead or behind, or perhaps how much they know about the categories at hand. Sometimes it depends on whether the individual is someone willing to risk everything. Regardless, when a Daily Double shows up on the board, it is never clear what the contestants will do. For those of you unfamiliar with the Daily Double, it is not a new lotto game from the Michigan Lottery. The Daily Double to which I am referring is an option in the game of Jeopardy to wager as little as a dollar or the entire amount that a contestant has accumulated. Most people seldom bet everything because they are not willing to risk all that they have accumulated. Still, it is always a risk versus reward scenario.

Calculating risk versus reward is something that we do every day. I say that because every day we take risks. We take risks getting out of bed, driving a car, going to the grocery store, or eating at restaurants. Each of these is risky because we could trip and fall, be in a car crash, get Covid from someone in the checkout line, or end up with food poisoning. Yet, on a regular basis many of us do all these things. We do so because we do a risk-reward analysis and decide which risks are worth taking, such as driving in a car...and which are not, such as jumping out of a perfectly good airplane to see if our parachute will open...though I know there are those among us who have done this. These are the type of risks that we are constantly weighing. But this raises a question for us this morning and that is, how do we evaluate the risk reward relationship along our faith journey?

Throughout the scriptures there are people who are willing to take risks and those who are not. This morning we have two stories which show us how this works. Our Old Testament text concerns one of the company of prophets. We don't know his name, but what we do know is that the prophet Elisha asks him to risk his life. This prophet is to go and anoint a general to be king. There are several problems with this action. First, there is already a king who would kill the prophet if he discovered what the prophet was up to. Second, the general works for the king who might see this anointing as an act of treason and kill the prophet. Third, even if the general allowed the anointing, his men might see this an act of treason and kill the general and the prophet. So, all in all a risky business, which calls upon the prophet to do a drive by anointing...meaning as soon as the oil hits the general's head, the prophet is to flee. The outcome of the story is that the prophet weighs the risk; death; and the reward; doing God's will and chooses the latter.

Our second story from the Gospel of Luke contains not one but two stories of risk vs. reward. The first story is about Jesus. Jesus has taken his followers out of Jewish territory and into Gentile Lands. On the surface this is not a great risk, though the two groups did not always get along. The greater risk is that the boat in which Jesus and his friends are riding comes ashore in a place haunted over by a man of superhuman strength; strength that is the result of demon possession. Though the people of that area had bound him in chains and shackles, they could not hold him. He was a man of whom all around him were afraid. The man could have attacked Jesus and his disciples. There was also the risk that when Jesus commanded the spirits to leave the man, they could have inhabited the disciples. While we tend to see Jesus as a superman, we need to remember that he was fully human, and as the cross reminds us, capable

of dying. Yet Jesus weighed the risk and the reward; being harmed or doing the will of God and making this man whole. Like the prophet hundreds of years before him, Jesus chose the will of God. But this is just half the story.

The second half of the story concerns the people of the land where Jesus and his disciples landed, and where Jesus healed the man with the demons. These people had lived in fear of the demon possessed man. We would assume then that when he was cured there would have been a celebration. The people would have come out of their homes and carried Jesus into town and given him wonderful gifts. Yet they had a risk reward calculation to do as well. Their risk reward had to do with the fact that Jesus had sent the demons into a herd of swine and the swine had drowned themselves. To put it simply, Jesus' act of freeing the man was only done at great financial cost to many of them. The question they were facing then was do we invite Jesus to stay and risk other financial losses or do we ask him to leave and run the risk of another demon possessed man arising. They chose the latter and asked Jesus to leave.

With all of this having been said, many of you may be asking yourselves, as I did for much of this week, so what is the risk that we take as Christians? I asked this because regardless of what you may hear in the media, Christians are not persecuted in this nation. We can worship freely. We can speak of our faith freely. We can read our Bibles freely. And because of these freedoms it would appear as if there were no real risk in being a Christian...yet there is. There is a risk because of what we are called to believe. As Jesus people we are called to believe that God is a God of justice and mercy. We are called to believe that God's love is for all persons and that we have no right to say who is in and who is out. We are called to believe that we are to love not only God but neighbor. We are called to believe that we are to feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, clothe the naked, house the homeless, and visit the prisoner. We are called to believe that we are to share what we have with those who don't have enough. And these beliefs are risky because they call us to do what we believe.

If we believe that God is a God of justice and mercy, we are to work for justice and show mercy to those whom the world doesn't believe deserves mercy. This is risky business. If we believe that we are to love all persons and refuse to say who is in and who is out of God's love, then we must act and love all of those people we might not want to love. This is risky business. If we believe that we are to love our neighbor and our neighbor is everyone, even our enemies, then we are to truly love our enemies. This is risky business. If we are to give water to the thirsty, food to the hungry, clothing to the naked, house the homeless, and visit the prisoner...then we must do this regardless of the personal or financial cost involved. This is risky business. Living our beliefs is risky business...personally, emotionally, spiritually, and financially. This is the risk reward calculation that we must make every day.

I wish this risk reward calculation could be easy, but just as in deciding on what to risk on the daily double in Jeopardy depends on any number of factors, so too does each risk we take for the kingdom of God. Some may be simple and the risk low. Others may be more difficult and the risk to ourselves great. Yet if we are to be Jesus people, then we need to at least make the calculation. We need to ask ourselves if the risk is worth the return and allow the Spirit to guide us. For in so doing, we just might discover that we can be like the prophet, and Jesus and risk it all for the Kingdom of God. My challenge to you this morning then, is for all of us to ask ourselves how am I measuring the risk and reward of faithfulness in order that I might do the will of God as the best I can.