

“RISKY BEHAVIORS”
A Sermon Preached at
FIRST UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
Belleville, IL
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(transcribed from audio file)

The scripture today comes from the gospel of Luke 19:1-10. This is the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus.

*And Jesus entered and passed through Jericho.
And, behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus, which was the chief
among the publicans, and he was rich.
And he sought to see Jesus who he was; and could not for the press,
because he was little of stature.
And he ran before, and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him:
for he was to pass that way.
And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up, and saw him, and
said unto him, Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for today I
must abide at thy house.
And he made haste, and came down, and received him joyfully.
And when they saw it, they all murmured, saying, That he was gone to
be guest with a man that is a sinner.
And Zacchaeus stood, and said unto the Lord: Behold, Lord, the half
of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken anything from any
man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold.
And Jesus said unto him, This day is salvation come to this house, for
so much as he also is a son of Abraham.
For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.*

NRSV

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Today we're talking about risky behavior. Now I know you all are good church folks, and you probably don't have anything in your past that involves a risky behavior, but I thought I'd go ahead and take the chance and ask you today, what are some of the risky things you've done in the past? Now before anyone volunteers, that wasn't a Presbyterian question. That was more like a Pentecostal question. You know, when I ask it, you say something back. I had to make this clarification at the

8 o'clock service. Listen to the vowels that I'm using. I said risky, not risqué. Lot of sharing at the 8 o'clock service today, so What's something risky?

You ran a red light? Wow! That was our first risky behavior from our 8 o'clock service, wasn't it? Yeah. OK. Anyone else?

You drank too much? Oh wow. Now it feels like you're bragging. Brag too much. That can be risky. What else is risky?

Almost choking on your favorite candy?

You don't floss every day? Oh, my goodness. The rest of us cannot believe what we are hearing.

OK. I'm just going to have to stop you. There are a lot of you eager to raise your hand. OK. Wow. We're gonna have a special service where we share stuff like this.

Today's scripture passage, it is about Zacchaeus being restored. It is about him making good after cheating the people, but I believe this story of Zacchaeus, like much of the gospel of Luke, is a story about risky behavior. Throughout the gospel of Luke, which is what we are focusing on during this month of our worship series, we're getting very clear that Jesus' mission is one to the lost, to those who are being oppressed, to those who need our help, that we need to show up for them. But there is an undercurrent throughout this entire gospel, and I would argue that even across all of the Holy Scriptures and that is that having this kind of faith, really having this kind of faith is risky.

We look at the story of Zacchaeus and what happened. Do any of you remember the little verse you learned? Zacchaeus was a wee little man; a wee little man was he. And so he climbed up in the sycamore tree, for the Lord he wanted to see. Very good!

So, here's the thing. Zacchaeus was a tax collector. He was not liked in the community because the way tax collectors worked back in the day is, they were seen as colluding with the enemy, those who had invaded the land, because the Romans would say, you gotta go out and collect 40% and the tax collectors would collect 50%. That extra bit would go where? In their pocket. Right? And if someone said, "oh no. I think you're trying to cheat me." All they would have to do was, "Roman soldiers. This one here refuses to pay their tax." So, these tax collectors got away

with all kinds of things and people did not like them. They weren't enforcing the tax codes of the time. They were stealing from people. It was extortion.

So they are not well liked, so probably Zacchaeus, over the course of his career had hurt a lot of people, so this guy who has a lot of enemies in the community, who is small, went up in a tree so that he could see the Lord and the Lord could see him, but you know who else could see him? All the people that he had been cheating and hurting over the years. You know how easy it would have been for one of them to just chuck a rock at him? Who's to say who threw that rock. I don't know. Where did that come from? It was a risk to be out in that crowd for Zacchaeus. It was a risk to put himself in a place where he could be easily seen. But the risk doesn't stop there because then Jesus comes along and Jesus could have picked anyone in the crowd and said, "Oh KC, I'm coming to your house today." And KC's like, "Great I made biscuits."

And so, Jesus and KC would have biscuits, and everything would have been fine. Nobody would have had a problem because we all know what a wonderful, good Christian KC is, even if she runs red lights. OK?

But, instead he picked Zacchaeus and said, "I'm going to your house." Meanwhile KC's like, but I've got biscuits. And all the other people are saying, "You're going to go with that person? The one who has cheated us? The one who has basically robbed us? Who has colluded with the enemy?"

Jesus puts himself at risk and he should know this. Jesus does this again and again and again. Particularly in the gospel of Luke. And so, you have Jesus taking a risk.

And then going to the house, both Zacchaeus and Jesus are at risk in this situation. People are noticing. That's when Zacchaeus makes his big speech about wanting to give back many times over what he has cheated from other people, to help them.

Faith is about being in risky behaviors. The kind of risky behavior that could get you in trouble in this world, or it could just feel risky to you.

Now here's the thing. I want to tell you about some particular risky behaviors that you can engage in as part of your faith. Honestly for us we are not in a situation like Zacchaeus. We also live in a wonderful country where we can profess our faith and no one's going to oppress us. People say, "Oh Christians are being oppressed in the United States." No, you're not. You don't know what oppression looks like. I feel

pretty comfortable in any setting saying, “I’m a Christian” and I don’t think it’s going to cost me my life here in Belleville, Illinois.

So, it’s not that type of risk in our faith. For us it’s risky sometimes around our own fears and securities. So, here’s the thing. I want to talk about some of these modern-day risks, but what I have found over the years is that when we start to talk about these types of things, people start to get a little offended. Sometimes people think, oh Pastor Rob was coming at me with that comment. Right? So, I’m gonna have you repeat a little mantra, all right? So, I want you to repeat after me.

I understand that Pastor Rob is not targeting me, however he might say something that challenges me and that’s okay.

Oh, I’m so glad to hear you say that.

Well, let’s start with Zacchaeus cause his response to the situation was a sacrificial generosity. That’s a risk that we can take. To give like those people at that Christian men’s conference that I talked about during the offertory, to give in a way that is sacrificial, to give in a way whether it’s not just of our money to the ministry and mission of Christ, but also of our time and talents, because if they feel like we don’t have the time to give, we don’t have the ability to give, we’re insecure about that, we certainly aren’t sure about the money we can give.

I remember a time when, in the course of becoming a pastor, the cash flow has not always been a good balance in our lives. And I remember the year that our first kid went to college and whoo that was a surprise. Right? And it was in a kind of transitional time in our lives and it was right around the time when we had been able to get more and more generous with our giving to the church and we had been increasing that percentage a little bit each year and we were really stretching it and were not thinking about college coming when we came up with the figure of what we were going to be giving to the church out of our household. It wasn’t a pledge year, so there wasn’t anyone in the office going, “Hey, Rob. Where’s that money?” But about halfway through the year, the cash flow wasn’t looking like it would be good during that school year. So, I stopped giving my offering to the church for a couple of months cause the cash flow just wasn’t going to work out.

Now look we could have dipped into some of the savings or retirement fund or whatever to make up for that, but at the time we just wanted to be able to give out of the cash flow. The money coming in, the bills going out and give out of that. We just stopped for a couple of months. This is risky for a pastor to admit to all of you,

but I did stop giving for a couple of months. But I said, at the end of the year we'll make it up. It's just right now the cash flow isn't working out.

Well, we got to November, and it wasn't changing much and at the beginning of November I said, I don't care and we just dipped into our savings and paid the full amount we had originally intended to give as an offering. And it doesn't always work out this way, but over the course of the next 90 days we had these blessings of additional income come in that were not expected. More than made up for that big offering we did in November. And I know that doesn't happen every time, but it happened that time.

And the other thing is, I hope you all realize that you know you are a part of a church where like, if you were overly generous with your giving and then you had trouble paying your utility bill next month, you do know you can come here and we'll help you pay your utility bill. Right? You know you're part of a church like that? Right? I mean, if you gave money to United Way and then 3 months later said, "oh I'm sorry. I was overly generous with my giving. Can I have that back?" How do you think that would go? You know you can do that here. If you want to try a more generous giving and then find yourself going, oh that was too much, I actually need some of that back. We would give it back to you. In fact this isn't very much of a risk at all, is it? That's one way. That's a risk that you can take as a modern-day Christian is to be sacrificially generous in your giving. But there are other ways too.

To create authentic community is a risk. So that when you're together, whether it's in a Sunday School Class, or a gathering of people here at the church, or a Bible Study group, or a discipleship group that you are a part of, and there comes that moment when you might share something of what's really going on in your life, of a real pain that you are going through, you can take that risk to go ahead and share it because when you do, not only are you opening yourself up to the opportunity for the rest of us to take care and to show you God's love through our response, but you are creating an authentic community for the other people who are there with you. because when they see you open up, when they see you be vulnerable and share what's really going on in your lives, it just creates a sacred space. That's a risk of authentic community that you can take as a modern-day Christian, that can have a real impact that comes out of your faith.

There's also the risk of being counter cultural with your priorities. There is a whole world out there that will gladly take your Sunday morning if you give it to them. There's a whole culture out there that will take away other portions of your life that

could be given to serving others or to participating in worship. They will take it from you, if you give it.

I remember going to our kid's dance instructor and saying, "You cannot schedule practices on Sunday mornings before noon, or Wednesday nights between 5:45 and 8:00pm. If you do, our kids won't be there." And in the beginning, do I think it cost them something? Do I think there are some routines where one of my kids was put maybe in the 2nd or 3rd row because of that? Yeah! Or a portion of the routine where they had to leave the stage and come back in? Yes! I think that happened, but I'm also confident my young adult children have never come to me and said, "Oh father, I so remember the trauma when I was young, and I was in the 2nd row of that routine. Oh!" Or "I was taken out of that one performance."

Eventually over the years we seemed to have come to an agreement and practices were always at 8:15pm on Wednesday nights or was moved and you can just join us at 1:00pm on Sundays. And I know that doesn't work for everyone, but I'm just encouraging you to think about whether you're managing someone's schedule in these types of events or you're talking about your own schedule, your own time. You have friends who say, well how about we do brunch on Sunday morning? It's okay for you to say, I'm sorry. I have church, but could we do it early Sunday, or later Sunday, or any other day of the week?

To make it a priority to be counter cultural is a risk that you can take and what you might lose from that just might be worth what you gain by being part of that counter cultural faith community. That's another risk you could take. Not all these risks are for everyone.

You could take the risk of some good ole fashioned everyday Evangelism. Ooh I said it. The E" word in front of Presbyterians. It's something as simple as taking the risk with a friend and saying you know I really get a lot out of being a part of my church community and I would love for you to get to experience it too. Would you like to come to church with me on Sunday? That feels very risky but I'm telling you right now you do it all the time just with different things.

I can't tell you how many people I've said, "I love that bar-b-que at Beast Bar-B-Q so much. I love it so much. I want you to experience it. How about we go for lunch there on Tuesday." I don't feel weird about that and consequently a lot of my friends have had good bar-b-que because of that. And I think what you've got here is better than bar-b-que. I guess what you're risking is your friend thinks you're a religious nut. They should know you better than that, but I mean, it's just simply saying I

have something good in my life, and I want to share it with you whether it's bar-b-que or lemon meringue pie or a particular movie or a play or church. And yet in our culture it feels like a risk of our faith to openly invite someone. But that's a risk you can take.

I've got one more for you on this menu of risks you can take. I would love to see us turn into really risky people. Not risqué! Risky people out of this church and that's to be there for fighting injustice which falls right in line with the mission of Jesus Christ. To risk! To risk what people might think of you for what you know is right. When you see the oppressed. When you see the poor. When you see the imprisoned. When you see those who are suffering who Jesus calls out in our scripture from the first week of this series, and to say something, to do something, to use whatever you have toward that, what are you risking?

You're risking maybe some intolerant friends who won't deal with you having a different opinion than them. You might be risking something really serious someday, but isn't the mission of Jesus Christ worth a little risk in your life? If it all fits neatly into a convenient little box, what kind of faith is it? It's not the one I hear about in the gospel of Luke.

So maybe it's about being overly generous and sacrificial in your giving.

Maybe it's about making faith a priority in your life above what the culture says.

Maybe it's about being open and sharing what your real struggles are with other people who create an authentic community.

Maybe it's everyday evangelism and inviting someone to experience the goodness you have.

Maybe it's the risk of standing up for injustice that you see in this world.

But one of those things, surely one of those things is worth whatever risk it is to you. Otherwise, we're just a great Kiwanis Club with music. And that's not knocking the Kiwanians. That's just saying that what we have is something else. Something beautiful. Something big. Something worth the risk.

May God be glorified by all the risky behaviors that you engage in.

Halleluiah and Amen.