

# GOSPEL OF RISK - SAYING YES

## Ordinary Time

Mark 10:17-22

A Sermon Preached by Alexandra Bush-Kaufmann and Rev. Bob Fitzgerald  
With Introduction by Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz  
University Congregational Church of Christ  
Seattle, Washington 98125  
September 4, 2016

Scripture:

**Mark 10: 17-22<sup>1</sup>**

As Jesus went out into the street a man came running up, greeted him with great reverence, and asked, "Good teacher, what must I do to get eternal life?" Jesus said, "Why are you calling me good? No one is good, only God. You know the commandments: Don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't lie, don't cheat, and honor your father and mother." He said, "Teacher, I have — from my youth — kept them all!" Jesus looked him hard in the eye — and loved him! He said, "There's one thing left: go and sell what you own and give it to the poor. All your wealth will then be heavenly wealth. And come and follow me." The man's face clouded over. This was the last thing he expected to hear, and he walked off with a heavy heart. He was holding on tight to a lot of things, and not about to let go

-----

Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz

Prayer:

God,  
In this day and in the season of new beginnings,  
you again are knocking on the door of our hearts,  
calling us out of that which binds us into all that would free us into more abundant life.  
Thank you God for those who are brave with their stories and the sharing of them,  
so that we might be brave with living out our own. — Amen.

-----

I know what it's like to hold on. I know all too well what it's like to be the rich young ruler sometimes, holding on to all of these things that look like what I should be holding onto, for they are good things aren't they? They're security and they're safety. They're keeping things the same. They're being rational and true. And yet — maybe for you as it is for me — sometimes in my life, I use all that as an excuse, for I know that there is something between me and the kind of abundant life that Jesus keeps calling us out to back, beckoning this out to all of the time. And so I wonder what is keeping you bound today. And how is the calling Christ knocking on the door of your heart and saying, "Come and follow. Risk that thing you never quite dared doing and step out with me and discover more full and abundant life, in deed, a very life to call your own." Indeed what a gift it is we have people who step forward daring to share and be brave with their stories, so that we in fact might be brave with our own.

Thank you Alexandra for sharing your story

---

<sup>1</sup> The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language. Translated by Eugene H. Peterson, ©2002.

# GOSPEL OF RISK - SAYING YES

Alexandra Bush-Kaufman

I know what it's like to hold onto things in my life, and I am feeling called to let go. I hear a call away from my safe work into a new work. And I wouldn't be here talking about this risks today without this congregation and my family and my closest friends. I hear call to be an agricultural economist and a farmer. I want to be a strong female role model and the bilingual mother.

When I joined this congregation four years ago I was lost — not that it is required that you know what you doing with your life at age 23. However, I was about to embark on a Masters of the nutrition and I really had no idea what I wanted to do. Graduate education is supposed to allow professionals to focus their studies and career to become better and more efficient and what they already do. Instead I became largely disoriented from all of the possibilities around me, and also by the growing injustice within our governing global systems.

It was in graduate school that I began to understand that where you live affects your life outcomes that the color of your skin can determine your health risks. And that these American problems of childhood obesity were spreading beyond our national borders. In my nutrition work I have learned that what we eat is shaped by the kinds of foods available to us. Last week Amy Roon, one of the pastors here, shared with us the intimate struggles of using the supplemental nutrition assistance program for Women Infants and Children — or WIC, a federal program that provides financial vouchers to purchase formula, baby foods, and other foods for the children of low-income families. The choice that people like Amy need to make, between expensive name-brand engineer and generic formula, is shaped by contracts and negotiations with the Washington State Department of Health and private formula companies. Those contracts in turn are shaped by taxes, trade, and political power. All of these forces shape Amy's ability to purchase formula with WIC vouchers, including how much formula they will buy, what vitamins the formula is required to have, and how much the journey will cost Amy physically and emotionally. This is largely referred to as agricultural economics — or the values of what we place on our food and the system that delivers our food to us.

Seeking love and justice in a global food system that values wealth over prosperity, greed over sustainability, and the one over the many is not impossible, but it is risky. It's the kind of risky work I feel called to engage in. I have been working most recently in emergency food system. I have come face-to-face with the realities of choosing between paying your bills or feeding your children, the reality of choosing unhealthy food, because it's more affordable. And now our realities of people in other parts of the world selling their native — foods like quinoa to North America — and then suffering poor health than being able to consume those foods in their home countries.

I can no longer think of the global food system of which agricultural products and climate change a significant role, I can no longer think of these as hypothetical problems with imaginary starving climate refugees. I can no longer dance around the injustice of cheap food making poor people sick and thus making them poorer.

I want to study and help shape the economic forces of our food system. I know that this will require a lot of a ... a lot of me and the people in my life. I know it will require another graduate degree. It will require financial uncertainty. It will require living in another country, so that I can learn more about these complex issues involving our food choices.

## GOSPEL OF RISK - SAYING YES

I have worried about my partner Tucker, my student debt, my future financial stability, my theoretical children, and my relationships. I have talked with my parents, and they have expressed their own worries — or displeasures of living farther away from myself and Tucker. And though my parents raised me with the values of service and nurturing community, the idea of actually following my call for service of the wider community brings up practical concerns like: Can you pay your bills? Will you have health care?

Here's a pro tip: when you've experienced an awakening to a greater purpose to journey upstream, to work to dismantle greed and power in the global food system, and you're likely going to pursue a PhD in economics, do not boil it down by telling your parents that, quote, "You're giving up on America and moving to the Andes to be a subsistence farmer." Trust me that doesn't go over well.

And yet despite all of this feedback from others and these fears and uncertainties that I know, I feel called to step into this adventure — even though it will mean calculus, statistics, Spanish classes, and more school. I will need to look more deeply at issues like power, greed, war, starvation, genocide — which I would rather avoid looking at — even though it will mean the possibility of a move to South America far away from family and friends.

The truth is I couldn't be here today without you. I couldn't stand here without this congregation and the ways that I have seen you take risks. I have seen people stand up and say goodbye, to leave and work somewhere else. I have seen people invite strangers into their lives. I have seen people risk love and truth in the face of hatred and fear. And you make me stronger.

I see God in the faces of the clients at the emergency food pantries I visit. They are hungry and ashamed. They are angry and tired. And why shouldn't they be? The economy has cut them out, left them to starve. I see God in the volunteers and the staff of the small community farms that supply vegetables to the emergency food pantry. I hear the urban farmers say, "I don't get upset when people pick food without asking, because I know whoever took that food is hungrier than me."

I see God in the community educators that I work with and around. Despite an economic system that sets people against each other, these educators work to build community. They give of their time to share knowledge of preparing healthy food without great expense. They inspire the low income clients that they work with to choose healthier foods for themselves and their families. So many times in my life I have had opportunities, and I step aside from them, because it might take too long or I might fail. And I can dismiss myself now and say that I'm not smart enough or who am I to do this? And, yes, I too have been afraid; but this time I want to be more than afraid. I am on the verge of saying "yes" with my life to some major changes. I couldn't stand here today, risking this, without what I have seen in you.

Peter Ilgenfritz

Thank you Alexandra.

And there we are *all* standing on the verge of saying "yes," or risking "yes" in our lives.

And whether you are 27 years old or 89 years old or 101 years old, we all know that question and we all stand in the same place: Can I risk "yes." And sometimes there is the grace of hearing a response and knowing it. Thank you, Bob.

# GOSPEL OF RISK - SAYING YES

Bob Fitzgerald

Thank you, Alexandra. Thank you.

The question would come up, just out of the blue, every so often. It would just pop into my head. I would think about it. Might read a thing or two about it. Might have a discussion with somebody. But ... uhm ... ehh ... I wasn't quite ready for that. It wasn't real yet; but it was an interesting question.

Then 25 years ago or maybe it was 15 .. or ... 10. — I'm not too good with math or timing. It was some time ago. The question came up *again*. But this time there was something, something special about it. It wasn't just an academic question. It had something to do with the bones and blood and the body and the mind and all of who I am. And the question was,

"Do you experience the universe as friendly?"

Oh! Isn't that a nice little simple question to come popping up in the middle of the night or the day?!

"Do you experience the universe is friendly? "

Well, yeah, I mean, that's easy for *you* to ask! I don't know where the question came from. I realize that when I thought about it, I deliberately edited it and took out the word God, so I wouldn't have a tendency to just automatically respond the way I was taught I was supposed to. But it became a question that just hung there and wouldn't go away. And made me consider a whole bunch of questions.

Is the universe that I experience friendly to me? Is that what we live in?

I was aware that there were playwrights and philosophers and thinkers and ... who wrote books and plays and essays about the, this issue and suggested the question, "Maybe this is just, maybe this is just a joke! Somebody's giving us a joke, uh, a test. We're just here as a kind of a passing through; and there's, there's nothing very substantial about all this, so just take it and grin and bear it." That's what I ran into.

And I thought, wait a minute! The answer to this question can be really risky and pretty serious. And I thought, that's a question that had some existential elements to it, because it ... I wouldn't let go of it. It felt like it *wasn't* the question that I was supposed to find some answers out here and take it; it was like finding some answers *in here* and affirming it — because that's what an existential issue is.

We got life. I didn't ask to be here. I assume you didn't. I did nothing to get here. And then, on the other hand, I know there's death. You know that. We're *all* dying actually, if you tell the truth. So what happens in between, is there a sense of a universe that is friendly? I think that's a realistic and risky question for parents of kids who go off to war. Or maybe go off to college. Or maybe there's a pretty serious question about this by the families of color, when their kids go off to an all-night program someplace, then try to get home safely. Or maybe for people who are scheduled for a hospitalization or a surgery, and that question kind of comes up — maybe not to be discussed, but it's hanging in there somewhere, right? It's in us. Or maybe it's, it's the whole business of people who are married and getting divorced, and they're, they're finding their lives shattered. Or maybe there's people who are just wondering how many more breaths they are going to have. Those are all real things. The question demanded an answer. The question was a serious one.

## GOSPEL OF RISK - SAYING YES

Do I — personally — *experience* a friendly universe? There's plenty of evidence that it's not friendly. That's obvious to us, since day by day by newspaper and by our own personal lives, there's plenty of things to suggest this is a dangerous world to be living in. And so we take that for granted, because we are reminded of that possibility.

But what about the question,

"Do you experience the universe as a friendly place?  
... — An experience for you and me."

And then there was that moment — oh it was, let's see, it was 25 years ago, I think. ... No, it was 15. ... It *could've* been 10. I don't know. ... It was somehow related, interestingly enough and, Alexandra, I am using the benefit of what you had to say to suggest that this is a risky church to be in. Because it was a result of the sermons I heard here by some folks that we all know. And it was the lectures I heard from the ... from the lecture series right here in this congregation over the years. And, it was those people who came to Seabeck and shared rich, empowering experiences and questions. *All* of that had an influence on me.

And so if there's any, any new visitors here today, before you leave, I hope you speak to me about this. Because if you're thinking about coming to this church, it's a risk. Heh! You're taking a risk. 'Cause you're going to find some things that are going to offer you some things to think about, and things to affirm, and things to existentially ask yourself, "What is life all about?" That's what we're up to.

Well, there was that moment — whenever it was — that I decided this asks existential question that has to be answered, because I didn't want this thing flooding around in my life.

And I said "yes". I said, I have ... I [thought] ...

... Where's the evidence? — I don't have any evidence.  
... Where's the argument? — Well, now, I don't want to argue with anybody.  
... Then what's the deal? — The deal is: that's a question that I'm confronted with as a human being, that I'm willing to answer it and I say, "yes".

And then I realized how risky that answer was, because it immediately confronted me with a few others — a few other questions, a few other issues that popped up that I had to deal with.

But ... — there was a *word*, you see, for this question.

Christian faith is just *loaded* with theological language, almost more than I can stand. Heh. Every, every Sunday I come and hear a load of theological language that just overwhelms me, some of which I think I know and some of which I think like, "What is that about?" But there's a word — there's a word! — for this question that I answered. And I said "yes" to I experience the universe is friendly. The word is *Grace*. ... Grace. ... Grace. ... Unconditional love. The nature of nature is on our side. The affirmation that there is that which is holy and sacred right here in our midst, right with us, before we even realize it, closer than hands and feet. It's part of our breath. It's part of who we are. It's how we hear it. Grace. The word that just came. The powerful word of Grace.

And that led then to a couple of other things that I had to deal with.

## GOSPEL OF RISK - SAYING YES

And the first one was, I had been raised and I had thought I had been trained in theism. And I gave that up. I had to give that up. I had to give that up. Theism. A belief in a supernatural God! Out there! Up there! A God that keeps a book of right and wrong. A God who plans and manipulates and has control over history and lives. I had ... I gave that up. That was a risk!

Now can you imagine the risk that if I show up at the pearly gates someday, and there's a, there's a, there's an old man sitting there with a, with a beard and a great big book, and he says, he says something about, "Uh. You remember September 4th?" And I'd say, "Let's move on this conversation. Let's, let's move on to the next question. *Where's my room* here?" Now there's a risk, a risk about that. You see, I don't actually expect that experience. But what do I know? Well ... All I know is what's in my being and in my heart. And so I gave this theistic idea of God up.

And then I discovered a God that is so close I can't get away. It's a part of, it's a part of all of us. It's a spirituality. It's a presence. It's a Holiness that is just there. It's in our very being. It's in our breathing. I sense it constantly. Not always. But what I know is that there is a God that's a part of everything. And it was Marc ... Marcus Borg who introduced the concept of panentheism that means so much to me, that is that God is constantly present and that God is with us all.

And then there is the second thing that confronted me. And that was I had to deal with the issue of a ... of an interventionist God. Because there were those times when ... when things were not going too well for me or loved ones or friends, and I was led to believe that I needed to mobilize my prayer life and convince the God to do something helpful to change the lives of somebody or the circumstances or save them from the dilemma that they might be in. And then I was confronted with "wait a minute!" I'm asking God to intervene, especially, *especially* for someone sometimes somewhere to do something. And then I realized "wait a minute"! With Grace whatever is best and whatever is loving is already being done! It's *being done* before I even asked! It's *being done* before I even think about it! So I am called to be in a mood of gratitude and of being awed by the blessing, knowing that everything doesn't work out in the midst of terror and trials and tribulations. That's obvious. It's still trying to weigh into a better world – that I trust in a power that is working on behalf of all of us.

Well, you can imagine the third issue that I was confronted with. Its back to those Pearly Gates. You know if the, if I say "yes" to Grace, what about the ... what about the end of life? And I'm facing that. Everybody does. It's a given, right? And then I realized I don't know much about that! And I started thinking. You know, I don't even know a whole lot about *before* life! You know, before life, where'd I come from? What — what, what, what, what awareness do I have of anything at that end of the scale? Well, I thought, I can't think of anything right off my head. What about over here? And I thought, well, there was a theologian. Let's see I think that was 25 years ago — maybe 15 — I don't know — probably more like 10. He said he didn't know the furniture of Heaven nor the temperature of Hell. Oh! That sounds like something I understand, 'cause I don't have a clue what the furniture of heaven would be like and I sure don't like to think about the temperature in Hell. So the risk was to make an affirmation that changed my life, that influenced me in many ways. There's the, the word Grace: unconditional love, caring, support, and nurturing. That's the word. That's the word.

To you in this section of the congregation, what's the word to you? [Grace!] To you [here], what's the word? [Grace.] In the balcony, in the chancel what's the word? [Grace.] The congregation, what's the word? [Grace!]

# GOSPEL OF RISK - SAYING YES

Amazing Grace.

-----

UCUCC: ABK/BF/PI

Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew from [www.universityucc.org/Sermons/2016/10/26/2016](http://www.universityucc.org/Sermons/2016/10/26/2016)