

JULY 1, 2018, “Holding On, Letting Go--- Risks Worth Taking”

Scripture: Mark 5: 21-43

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I want to first of all share that I come to this scripture passage today differently that I did even several weeks ago because of the impact that the separation of the children from their parents at the border has had on me. I continue to be appalled and deeply troubled. I believe the parents carefully considered the risks before attempting to enter our country. Their attempts must surely have been based on their decisions that the risks were worth taking. Those parents intimately know the meaning of “Risks Worth Taking” ----probably more than most or any of us here this morning will ever know or experience. And what a news week it has been!

Becci just introduced us to 3 incredible risk takers: Jarius, the women who suffered a bleeding issue, and Jesus. Wow, did they ever dance onto the wire. What each did was unbelievable, bold and over the edge.

Take Jarius: a church leader, maybe even the “bishop” of his synagogue, who was dealing with a crisis in his home. He was losing his daughter. Certainly, he would have been praying for healing, but her life was slipping away. In desperation, he decided that his daughter was more important than what the congregants would think and say, so he rushed to find Jesus.

Jesus, the miracle man; the radical, despised, hated activist who he probably heard had recently healed an uncontrollable man who lived in the town cemetery ---the man who would run around howling and screaming and cutting himself with stones—the man no one ever wanted to get close to, but who had become calm when he met Jesus and who then engaged in a normal conversation with him. It was an unbelievable life changing miracle for the community to witness. In fact, the change was too much for the community. They resented Jesus and wanted him out of town. They begged him to leave and so he did.

He got into his boat and went to the other side of the lake. But soon Jesus was swamped by another crowd.

And into this crowd, Jarius danced onto the wire. You know, when one becomes desperate, one is more willing to take a risk. Jarius, perhaps with GREAT humiliation, fell at Jesus' feet and begged him to come to his house to keep his daughter from dying. Jarius, a person of great status, at the top of the religious structure, risked this status, to meet this despised, hated activist to beg him to save his daughter.

It was a risk worth taking.

While Jarius was engaging Jesus, another person decided to take a risk. Unfortunately she was not given a name in scripture. I wish she was named Mary because I like the name Mary and because Mary was an honored name in scripture. This no-named woman, was not going to let Jarius take Jesus from the crowd without first trying to sneak a touch of his clothes.

After all, she was losing life, too, wasn't she? She also was desperate, wasn't she? For 12 years she kept losing blood. Was it from an earlier miscarriage or from an abortion or from irregular menstruation? In any case, she had lived 12 miserable years, permanently excluded from life in the community because the bleeding issue could not be fixed. Perhaps she thought if Jesus could heal the screaming, wild man, who also had been permanently excluded from his community, then perhaps Jesus could also heal her.

And what a courageous, strong risk-taker she was. She decided to break the law, by making Jesus unclean, by sneaking up behind him to lightly touch his clothes. She did not fall at Jesus' feet. She did not beg for mercy to have her life saved. She unobtrusively bent down to touch the hem of Jesus' clothes.

It was a risk worth taking.

One person found Jesus and risked meeting him from the front to beg for a merciful healing. The other person found Jesus and risked a touch from behind, hoping to not be noticed at all.

Both danced on the wire. Both did "something audacious; defying authority, leaving the security of their inherited faith" to risk everything as they stepped onto the wire---- words from the poet John Clement Pfitzner, which was read earlier by Joseph Gascho.

Were they afraid? Surely, each must have been scared, perhaps even shaking and sweating, wondering if their risk would make a difference.

And Jesus, being the risk-taker that HE was, stopped in his tracks, having felt some power going out of his body, and called out, "Who touched my clothes?"

And Peter and James and John and the other disciples, you know, that inner circle of Jesus' secretaries said, "Now that was a stupid question. Many people are touching you."

But Jesus waited and waited and waited. He looked around and waited some more. The wait must have been excruciating for that dear woman who never should have touched his clothes in the first place. And so being the risk-taker that she was, she chose to fess up "in fear and trembling" Can't you imagine how hard she was shaking? She fell at Jesus' feet, just like Jarius had done earlier, acknowledging she was the guilty one who snuck that touch.

Jesus blessed and respected her risk-taking. He said it was ok, telling her, "Daughter, thy faith has made thee whole; go in peace, and be healed." With those words, Jesus raised an outcast, the one who was never supposed to touch anyone or be touched to full status, to the top. He called her daughter. He spoke such kind affirming words, assuring her that she does not need to live in fear any longer.

It was a risk worth taking.

So now, how was Jarius dealing with this INTERRUPTION? What were his thoughts? Was he supportive of this woman who distracted Jesus from hurrying to his house or was he irritated?

Yes, the wait was too long. Someone came to tell Jarius his daughter had died.

However, Jesus continued to Jarius' house, all the while comforting him that it will be all right. Jesus, the habitual risk-taker, "stepped onto the wire" when he arrived at the house and proceeded to touch a dead body. HIS touch made HIM unclean; which meant he was not to touch or to be touched by anyone for 7 days, according to Numbers 19:11. He took the 12 year old daughter's hand and said, "Get up". To everyone's amazement, she got up, began walking and even ate some food.

It was a risk worth taking.

Jarius had done the audacious, by risking his reputation and status to seek help from the despised, hated, activist Jesus, to save his daughter. He must have deeply loved her in a culture where sons were more valued than daughters.

Jesus, Jarius and the unnamed woman all “stepped onto the wire”, showing by example how to move beyond one’s fears to embrace love and compassion--- to move beyond safe places and easy answers.

What risks would you like to take? It doesn’t matter if one chooses to risk openly with many observers or to risk secretly, hoping no one notices. There is NO ONE WAY to take risks. There is no one way to meet Jesus. There is no one way to “step onto the wire”. There is no one way to give up status and reputation to become a Jesus seeker. Jesus seekers are risk-takers, risks worth taking.

Jane Yoder-Short, a columnist in the Mennonite World Review newspaper, wrote these challenging words this past January: “Jesus-followers are risk-takers sent out to live bravely under the brand of Jesus. We are rooted in a history of risk-taking. The 16th-century Anabaptists risked execution as heretics. During World War I, Mennonites risked prison to follow Jesus’ way to love enemies. Are we living in safer times? Have we lost the courage to be risk-takers? If we keep our ears open, we continue to hear of risk-takers. We hear of Congolese Mennonites in the midst of violence risking their welfare to share with neighbors. We hear of peacebuilder Michael J. Sharp risking and losing his life. We hear of churches risking criticism to become sanctuaries. Risk-taking possibilities surround us. What are we willing to risk? Are we ready to risk job security to speak out against exploitation?

To risk coziness to love our unfamiliar neighbors? To risk our tidy views in order to listen non-judgmentally?” She ends her column by asking, “Who knows what the year will bring... as risk-taking, Jesus-flavored heroes act despite their fears?” (1)

What if we all do something “audacious.... defying authority, leaving the security of inherited faith, risking everything and stepping out onto the wire?” The opportunities are immense right now, aren’t they? One feels almost over-

whelmed by the opportunities. The struggle becomes WHICH risks, which issues, do I give of my energy, time and money. The marches yesterday speak of the desire of many people to become involved to express their concerns and commitments for justice.

The story of Jarius and the unnamed women remind us that if we take courage to meet Jesus, Jesus will meet and walk with us. And just like the unnamed women, we need to touch his clothing.....his clothing of mercy, his clothing of forgiveness, his clothing of love and kindness, his clothing of compassion, and gratefulness --- All touches worth the risk.

Life offers many opportunities to go beyond safe places and easy answers. We need to “step onto the wire” like Jarius did for the sake of his daughter (I say for the sake of our children and grandchildren and nieces and nephews and all children) or like the unnamed women did for the sake of her health and wholeness (I say for the sake of our health and wholeness) or like Jesus did for the sake of restoring life to the untouchables (I say for the sake of creating communities that enriches life for all). Like Jarius, we seek Jesus. Like the unnamed women, we sneak an unobtrusive touch to the hem of Jesus’ clothes and like Jesus, we keep going on and keep going on with determination and compassion. All risks worth taking.

(1) Mennonite World Review, January 29, 2108, “Sparrow Watcher” by Jane Yoder-Short