

Genesis 33:1-11
Psalm 29
Acts 6:8-14, 7:54-60
John 3:1-15

Sermon January 12th, 2020

God's Invitation to Follow is Worth the Risk

Last week we heard stories of God's invitation to follow. God's invitation to us to live our lives reflecting God's generosity and gracious love to others.

This week we hear stories where choosing to follow God comes with some risk. In our Genesis reading, Jacob listens to God by agreeing to go see his brother Esau who Jacob betrayed in their childhood. If you recall the story, Jacob tricks their father Isaac into giving him Esau's blessing. So, Jacob is taking a pretty big risk here, since there is a very good chance Esau has not forgiven Jacob and could choose to enact revenge on Jacob and his family when they meet.

In our book of Acts reading, Stephen has been given the authority to preach the gospel to the people in Jerusalem. He does so faithfully even at the risk of being persecuted. Stephen and many of the early believers took great risks to ensure that Jesus' words and actions continued to give people life. Unfortunately, for Stephen his words provoked the wrong people, and he faced death for preaching the good news.

In our gospel reading this morning, we hear of Nicodemus, a Pharisee, who really wants to believe in all that Jesus is teaching. Who wants to understand. Who knows that Jesus is more than just another rambling person. But, who sneaks out at night to see Jesus, because he feels the risk is too grave. Maybe he could lose his career or his reputation as a respectful leader or even his life for recognizing Jesus' teachings as authentic.

When we hear Jesus' invitation to come and follow we too face risk. Fortunately, we live in a country where we have the freedom to believe in Jesus' teachings so it is unlikely we will face the kind of fate Stephen faces for sharing the gospel. Yet, like the early disciples of Jesus, we too face persecution. People who have made assumptions of who we are based on their personal and media experiences of Christianity. People who may reject us or make fun of us for believing in what they think is nonsense or exclusive or harmful or archaic. Painting us all with the same brush. When there are many of us Christians who are very intelligent, inclusive to others, and work hard at being reflections of Christ's grace and healing in the world.

Sometimes we find ourselves in relationships where we cannot share this very intimate part of ourselves out of fear that we may lose the relationship. Sometimes we find ourselves working in an occupation where if we share our faith we could face

consequences from our employer. We take a risk when we choose to live out our faith everyday.

Like Jacob, God also invites us to make some tough choices that can challenge us to live out our faith. Whether it is moving us to reconcile with someone we love. Or encouraging us to give more than we think we can afford to help support the ministries of the church. Or challenging us to give up some of our leisure time to offer our talent to a particular ministry. Or nudging us to reach out to that person at the bus stop who looks completely down and out. Sometimes we are asked to take a risk, to make some tough choices, to be God's instrument of generosity and gracious love in the world.

Like Nicodemus, sometimes the risks seem overwhelming for us. Sometimes, we find ourselves meeting Jesus at night when everyone is asleep. Or in other words, sometimes we hide our faith, because we are afraid of what could be. We are afraid that this person won't like us or we will lose our job if we share our faith. We are afraid that if we give what we feel God wants us to give we won't have any money left to cover all our expenses. We are afraid that if we approach this person at the bus stop that they may try to harm us or we may make things worse for this person.

Sometimes we pick and choose when to live out our faith, because we have trouble letting go of some of the things we have become attached to or comfortable with. We might have to give up a thing or two that we like indulging in like that daily coffee at Starbucks or that weekly cheese burger from Fatburger or that collection of whatever we like collecting to give financially to support the ministries of our church. Or we might have to give up a night at the bar or a night watching that game or a night playing cards or a night with friends or family to make time to volunteer for a ministry in the church. We understand Nicodemus, because we too find ourselves at times struggling with the risk, sneaking out at night to meet Jesus.

Now, for Jacob and Stephen, they plunge forward and throw themselves completely to the wind or should I say the Spirit. Jacob approaches Esau and his four hundred bodyguards with great fear and trepidation. And what we see is not a slaying of him and his family. What we see is a miraculous act of grace on the part of Esau as he runs to embrace his brother forgiving Jacob of all wrong doing. What we see is a humble and repentant Jacob who is overwhelmed by Esau's grace, and chooses to reconcile.

Stephen does face death, but he is given the grace and the strength to offer forgiveness to those who hurt him. What we find out is Saul is one of the people who stood at Stephen's body. Saul who becomes Paul. Was it in that moment where grace first touched Paul?

And what does Nicodemus hear when he is still wrestling with Jesus' invitation. Those who believe inherit eternal life. So, Stephen a believer who preached the good news didn't do so in vain. Stephen is not dead but alive. And there is still hope for Nicodemus. He can still accept all that Jesus' invitation has to offer.

We too are shown this amazing grace as we try to live out our faith in the world. Like Nicodemus, Jesus continues to answer our questions. Jesus continues to invite us to participate in God's ministry for the world. Even as we approach him at night. Even when we struggle to give in the offering plate. Even when we struggle to find time to volunteer. Even when we struggle to approach the person at the bus stop. Even when we struggle to share our faith with someone else.

Instead of giving up on us or scolding us, Jesus encourages us to trust in God's promises. To believe that God will take care of us. Jesus points us to the scriptures where we see God's promises come alive for God's people. Where we see what happens when we take a risk and put our faith in Christ. Where we see the reconciliation between two people. Where we see someone change into the loving person Paul becomes. Where we see all that the disciples do to give life to people. Where we see all that Jesus does to give life to people including risking his own life so others may experience God's redemption and healing. Jesus points us to scripture and then points us to our hearts and our minds where we see all that God has done in our church and in our lives to reflect God's generosity and love to others.

Yes, following Christ comes with risk. But with great risk comes great reward, and what we see in Christ's ministry is the gracious love and generosity of God changing the world. What we see in Christ Jesus is life everlasting.

Let us pray, loving God, sometimes we struggle to follow you, to take the risks we need to take so that people can experience your generosity and gracious love. Give us the humility, the trust, the belief, to follow you from darkness into the light reflecting your love to the people we encounter. And thank you for your patience as we keep trying to follow you everyday of our lives. **Amen.**

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