

### PLAYING IT SAFE

Let me begin this morning with a question: Would you say that you live a risky life?

It is quite likely, I think, that we would all answer this question in the negative. We would probably think not, figuring that risky living would mean a putting of ourselves in harm's way. It would mean a lifestyle that could be construed as reckless, or a job that is widely regarded in some manner or other as being dangerous.

So, on the basis of such a definition, since our lives are neither reckless nor endangered, they could hardly be regarded as risky. Agreed?

OK, now that we have that settled: Would you say, from the little story that we have heard this morning regarding Zacchaeus, that what he does is risky?

Probably so. Even though he is not out there disarming IED's or something equally perilous, climbing out there on that limb over Jesus' parade route may not have been the most conservative, or the sanest, thing he could have done.

After all, if his curiosity about Jesus or his admiration for Jesus is supposed to be a secret, kept from the paranoid authorities, by virtue of all his present efforts, it is plainly no longer so. That might be considered reckless. And it might also be a dangerous thing to do, too, since the limb could break or he could slip and take a life-ending plunge to the pavement.

In either case, compared to simply remaining in his tax office, routinely taking care of business, what he does seems, well, a bit out there.

In light of this delineation of Zacchaeus' clearly risky situation, we'd probably have to confess that, by comparison, we dedicate considerable time and energy to avoiding any such circumstances. All the evidence would indicate that our personal priority is on the side of what we might call "playing it safe." Our motto might be, "Above all else, be careful."

In the face of all sorts of intimidating, frightening things that life potentially brings our way, playing it safe appears on the surface to be certainly the most prudent course. It is this conclusion which leads us to think that the guy soaring along on the hang glider has a screw loose, or that the habitual bungee jumper likely has some sort of death wish.

No one in his/her right mind, we figure, would purposefully leave the foundational security of good, solid earth. Ironically, per Luke's story, it is Zacchaeus who does exactly that. And it is Zacchaeus who, as a direct result of his hovering in the air and clinging to a few twigs, attracts Jesus' attention and receives Jesus' praise and favor.

So, there may be something here regarding a certain sort of risky behavior. No, this is hardly a call for us to begin playing with nitro glycerin or to get on the circuit of high speed motorcycle racing, but there are suggestions here about a sort of "risky behavior" which is to be courted by us.

There is something about this kind of "risky behavior" which evidences the fact that we are awake, that we are aware, and that we are actively engaged. There is something about it which signals to God our interest, our availability, our readiness.

It is Zacchaeus, quite literally putting himself out on a limb (let that figure of speech not be lost on us!), who gets to provide face-to-face hospitality to Jesus. That remarkable privilege, that situation of inestimable potential, is not afforded to any one of even the most intrigued standers on the pavement anywhere along Jesus' Jericho route, merely playing it safe in the anonymous crowd. Not one.

Looking at all this from a slightly different perspective, one might ask what's wrong with playing it safe?

From the spiritual angle, the answer seems to be this: Playing it safe tends to decrease expansion. Playing it safe keeps us almost exclusively contained in the familiar and therefore rigidly constricted. To wander too far outside that conveniently self-defining, self-limiting, and self-protecting box creates anxiety in us. Finding ourselves outside that zone of established comfort, we become fearful and suspicious, worried and tense. While all these reactions may be natural and understandable, spiritually speaking, they are the specific evidence of living in a world that is just too small.

Since God wants us to be inhabiting the largest possible world--which is another way of saying that God wishes for us to have a life of abundance--the expectation is for us to become acquainted with the unfamiliar in a thousand outer and inner forms. Over the long run, this continuing enlarging of our worlds makes us feel confident and capable in a whole range of new manners, which all along is the object of our development and growth as persons and as Christians. In this more spacious world, there is simply no place for something as absurd as a "white supremacist"--which tells us something about the state of the world at the moment that such persons should have such bold place on the American stage.

It requires risk, of course, to attempt, let alone to achieve, that stretching and deepening which occur when we have pushed outside the confines of our box of the comfortable. As persons of faith, however, we are to possess the holy fortitude to risk putting a toe, then a foot, and ultimately both legs outside of our habitual and inhibiting "safe" places. That is to be like Zacchaeus, climbing up gingerly and then shakily sliding out onto his limb, where, from that new perch, all the world looks different and, in short order, becomes different, too.

Having started this morning's reflections with a general question, let us (assuming that you buy into anything that has just been said) conclude with some very personal ones:

In light of Zacchaeus' illuminating example: How long has it been since we have positioned ourselves, well, a bit out there?

Have you treated yourself lately to a good limb?