

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Year A Proper 25  
1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46  
October 23, 2011

*In the name of the one God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Many of you may have enjoyed or remember the quirky hit movie "A Christmas Story." Though it came out in 1983, the movie centers around a young boy, Ralphie, who hopes to convince his parents, teachers, and Santa that a Red Ryder BB gun really is the perfect Christmas present for him.

Some of the best scenes in the movie are of Ralphie and his friends getting into all sorts of trouble outside of home and school. I know those of you who have watched the film remember the scene where one of Ralphie's friends gets his tongue stuck to a frozen metal pole.

For those of you who haven't seen the film, the dialogue just prior to this incident is priceless.

One of Ralphie's friends says: *"Are you kidding? Stick my tongue to that stupid pole? That's dumb!"* *"That's 'cause you know it'll stick!"* counters another.

And the conversation continues:

*You're full of it!*

*Oh yeah?*

*Yeah!*

*Well I double-DOG-dare ya!*

And at this point you hear a voice-over of an adult Ralphie saying:

*NOW it was serious. A double-dog-dare. What else was there but a: triple dare you?*

*And then, the coup de grace of all dares: the sinister triple-dog-dare.*

We are back at the playground and Ralphie's friend is being challenged:

*I TRIPLE-dog-dare ya!*

Uh oh. This bully, as the adult Ralphie narrates, "created a slight breach of etiquette by skipping the triple dare and going right for the throat!"

When I read the Gospel for this morning, I could not help but remember this scene from A Christmas Story.

The tension between the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Herodians and Jesus has been growing throughout the last few weeks. The Pharisees, Sadducees and Herodians have all been challenging Jesus, trying to entrap him, daring him to make a grave rhetorical blunder. But Jesus has been at the top of his game. He has done nothing but outwit his opponents. And we finally get to the dialogue this morning.

I dare you to try to answer this question - the lawyer seems to say.

And Jesus seems to come back with a double dog dare.

And we hear the end result:

"No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions."

To mix metaphors – Jesus just served an Ace to win Match point.

Of course the story doesn't end here. It is true - the Pharisees, the Saducees and the Herodians did not dare to ask him any more questions. The time for conversation was over.

We have to remember that our story this morning takes place at the beginning of Holy Week. Jesus has triumphantly entered into Jerusalem, but the days are growing decidedly more grey.

Yes, as far as his opponents are concerned, the time for conversation is over. And, unfortunately, the time for drawing up charges against Jesus is on the horizon.

Just as the eyes of the audience for Matthew's Gospel were, our eyes should be fixed on the cross. And it is through the cross that we should understand this passage.

"What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" Jesus asks.

And, like the readers of Matthew's Gospel, we know the answer.

He is the Messiah. He is the Son of David, yes. But we must understand, as one commentator put it, that what this means is that the Messiah is both in the line of David (as Hebrew Scripture says the Messiah would be) AND - at the same time - transcends this lineage (*Tim Beach-Verhey in Feasting on the Word, Year A Vol 4 p 216*).

He is much more than the hoped for David-like king coming to free the Israelites from an enemy people. He is God incarnate coming as king to free all people from sin and death!

Ultimately Jesus has the final say – in the argument we hear about this morning, and in the entire battle between good and evil, between redemption and sin, between life and death.

The Word made flesh has the last word.  
And the word is Good News.

And the Good news compels us to action.  
Not to feeling good about what we hear...  
But to acting on what we believe.

Listen to Paul.

In his letter to the Thessalonians he describes the risks he and his colleagues take in order to act on their belief - in order to love as God commands.

Paul says:

- we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition
- even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts.
- so deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

To put it simply these followers of Jesus Christ

- risk the very real wrath of their enemies
- risk having their hearts tested by God, and
- risk sharing their very selves – being entirely vulnerable with the people they come to teach, inspire and serve

I am not so sure that I would be so courageous.

I don't want to tempt my enemies. I would rather not have my heart tested by God. I am sure that might disrupt my comfortable existence. And I can certainly come up with many reasons to withhold my very self from others – especially those parts of me that would show all my vulnerabilities.

This was brought home for me last weekend when many of us gathered in West Virginia for our Parish Retreat which explored the themes of good, evil, and sacrifice as found in C.S. Lewis' book, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

In one session, referencing the royal battle scenes between kings and queens in the book, we all made personal shields to illustrate those gifts we possessed that helped us to defend against evil in the world and the evil inclinations of our own hearts.

On the outside of the shield – the side which we show to the world - we drew illustrations of those things that aided our fight against evil – things like compassion, love, creativity, faith.

But then we also illustrated the inside of the shield with images of those things which prevent us from fully confronting evil in the world - sin, pride, fear.

I thought my shield was very individual – until I learned that many of us wrestled with the same issues. How hard is it to take risks - to be vulnerable – to put your heart out – for ourselves, for each other, for God!

We just cannot be safe and follow Christ. Our relationship with God continually calls us out of our comfort zones. God never promises us safety.

C.S. Lewis knew that. There is a great scene in the book where the two young girls first hear about Aslan, the King of Narnia. The girls had never before heard of Aslan. Their hosts, Mr. and Mrs. Beaver, are eager to tell them about him.

At first the girls think that Mr. and Mrs. Beaver are talking about a man.

“Aslan a man!” said Mr. Beaver sternly. “Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the wood and the son of the great Emperor Beyond the Sea. Don't you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion – THE Lion, the great Lion.”

“Oooh! Said Susan, “I’d thought he was a man. Is he...quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.”

“That you will, dearie, and no mistake,” said Mrs. Beaver, if there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or else just silly.”

“Then he isn’t safe?” Said Lucy.

“Safe?” said Mr. Beaver. “Don’t you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.” (*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis pp 75-76)

God, our King, never promises us safety. God never promises to fulfill our wishes. But God promises much much more.

God promises relationship. God promises redemption. God offers all of this to us. But we have to take risks in order to open ourselves to these gifts of God.

As I worked to prepare my sermon this week I learned of a poem by Janet Rand. As you can imagine, given my experience at the Parish retreat, and my understanding of the importance of getting out of your comfort zone, I found this piece quite heartening. It says in part:

To reach out to another is to risk involvement.  
To expose feelings is to risk showing  
your true self.  
To love is to risk not being loved in return.  
To live is to risk dying. To hope is to risk despair,  
to try is to risk failure.  
But risk must be taken, because the greatest  
risk of life is to risk nothing.

The person who risks nothing...  
...may avoid suffering and sorrow,  
but he simply cannot learn,  
feel, change, grow or love.  
Chained by his attitude, he is a slave;  
he has fortified his freedom.  
Only the person who risks is truly free.

What if we, in our own lives, were to take the risks Paul and his colleagues took.

What if we were to

- risk the very real wrath of our enemies
- risk having our hearts tested by God, and
- risk sharing our very selves – being entirely vulnerable with the people around us

What if we were to risk following God knowing that in the end, like Moses, we may not enter into the long hoped-for and journeyed-to promised land.

What if we looked to Christ's example – of the humility and obedience that was behind all his challenging words to the Herodians, the Pharisees, the Saducees ...

What if we looked to Christ's journey to the cross, the journey that is ending as we read in this morning's passage – what if we looked to this journey with awe and gratitude ...

Would we find a freedom we have yet to experience?

Would we experience a love we have yet to feel?

Would we be inspired to risk again – to step out of our comfort zones – to stand with trembling knees before an unsafe God...

...in order to look beyond the everyday...

into new possibilities?

Today, the time for conversation is over.

We begin our walk with Jesus Christ towards the cross - towards his sacrifice and towards his victory.

Is there a risk in your life you know you must take – right now – in order to take that walk with Christ with integrity?

To walk with Christ and to love as Christ demands – to love God, and neighbor and self?

If there is a risk you are to take – and I believe in your heart you know what that is – I dare you to take it.

I double dare you.

I dare say, I triple dog dare you.

Amen.

Quotes from A Christmas Story came from: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0085334/quotes>