

Your Call is Among, For and To the People
Psalm 78:1—4; Matthew 21:23—32

‘Jesus loves me; this I know; for the Bible tells me so...’ Doesn’t that sound perfect? That’s all I need to know. And I’m grateful for the Bible telling me so. Jesus loves *me!* *Me! Myself! I am loved by Jesus.* But, of course, whether or not he loves *you* remains to be seen.

I wanted to talk with you today about a complication that puts this perfectly adorable and simple song at risk. And the risk, to cut to the chase, is *other people*. People other than *me*. And if RISK, by definition, is any decision or action which may result in some massive injury, some minor pain, some momentary discomfort or some loss of face, I suppose the only reason to engage in such risky behavior would be that we believe it’s worth it. It’s worth it. And what would be worth the risk would be some beautifully enhanced relationship, some thrill of a lifetime, some discovery of why there’s a dark spot on the x-ray, some potential healing or some enriching benefit. Years ago, I gave up skiing because, after blowing out my left knee and enduring two surgeries on my anterior cruciate ligament, I didn’t want to risk another wipe-out on the snowy slopes. In other words, the thrill of maneuvering the moguls—and even the enjoyment of joining my two sons at Schweitzer or Mount Spokane—just wouldn’t be worth it. At the same time, when I play cards and there’s no real money on the line, I’m usually all in. When I’m among family and friends; and it’s just my jovial pride at stake, I usually have no problem ‘shooting the moon,’ or ‘upping the ante.’ Some risks are riskier than others. And among the most risky of all risks, I would argue, is the risk of answering God’s call upon the individual life AMONG, FOR AND TO THE PEOPLE.

When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to [Jesus] as he was teaching and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?”

You see, this is how it works for Jesus. No one gets to ask him a question without risk; and the question he often asks of us in return is as risky as life gets. At this point in the gospel record, John the Baptist has already preached his last sermon; and if you recall, the major theme of what John preached wasn't 'Jesus loves me; this I know...' but— 'Repent! Turn around! Face up to the relationships that God has given you! The kingdom of God is near—as near as the poor peasant, next to you!' And wasn't that a risk? Anyway, fast forward to Jesus, entering the temple in Jerusalem, where the chief priests and the elders of the people ARE NOT willing to risk much of anything AMONG THE PEOPLE, FOR THE PEOPLE OR TO THE PEOPLE:

And they argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why, then, did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd, for all regard John as a prophet.” So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.”

Okay—well, thanks for playing! But this isn't like the contestant on *Jeopardy* drawing a blank. This isn't like the dementia patient forgetting the names of her children. This isn't like the absent-minded pastor fumbling the Lord's Prayer. This is a failure to trust that God will be with us as we respond to God's call AMONG, FOR and TO the people. Consider Psalm 78:

***Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;
incline your ears to the words of my mouth.
I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter dark sayings from of old,
things we have heard and known
that our ancestors have told us.
We will not hide them from their children;
we will tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of the Lord and his might
and the wonders that he has done.***

This is God, opening God's own metaphorical mouth, and putting God's covenant-love at risk with people—with *generations* of people! And if you're thinking, God can't risk, God doesn't risk or God won't risk—what's Jesus doing on the cross, and according to First John 2:2, dying for “*the sins of the whole world*”? And let's linger here: that ‘*world*’ includes generation after generation of those who may misunderstand the good news of Christ and him crucified and risen. They—the people—may misunderstand; and that's a risk. Am I?—are *we*?—willing to be misunderstood?

In 1977, the rock group, *Kansas* recorded a song, written and produced by Kerry Livgren. That song, *Dust in the Wind*, would become even more famous than an earlier hit, entitled *Carry On My Wayward Son*; and although the acoustic guitar and violins in the background are beautifully mesmerizing, some of the lyrics are intense and provocative:

I close my eyes
only for a moment
and the moments gone
All my dreams
pass before my eyes
a curiosity
Dust in the wind
All we are is dust in the wind.

Same old song
Just a drop of water in an endless sea
All we do
Crumbles to the ground, though we refuse to
see...
Dust in the wind
All we are is dust in the wind.

Now, is it possible to misunderstand where this risky song is going? And was it risky for a teenager (like me at the time) to sit with this message even as the well-meaning parents at church were singing ‘*Jesus loves me; this I know; for the Bible tells me so...*’? You bet! But how much are we willing to bet today, nearly fifty years later?

In his book, *Seeds of Change*, Kerry Livgren tells the story of how one of the managers for *Kansas* later connected him with Psalm 103:14—“***God knows we are dust...***” as well as Genesis 3:19 which says: “***Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.***” So, what do you think? Can we RISK thinking this way? Kerry Livgren did, and eventually he became a Christian *among, for and to the people*—which, in the music business at the time, was a profound risk. *Kansas* later split up because the lead singer, Joe Walsh, didn’t like where the next album would be leading. It would be leading to a risky relationship with Jesus Christ.

“***What do you think?***” Jesus asks this question of the chief priests and the elders of the people—the pillars of the religious status-quo—and I absolutely love that he asked them.

A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ He answered, ‘I will not,’ but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same, and he answered, ‘I go, sir,’ but he did not go.

You see, generation after generation, this is the riskiest question there is: *Will I go and work in the vineyard?* The second son in the parable speaks with perfect clarity and no hesitation, but he’s not going to risk the effort. The effort of working in the vineyard would require him to muck it up with the other workers. So—instead he’ll take the credit for going, but not go at all. The first son, by contrast, seems to understand the risk. If he goes, he’s going to experience frustration and disappointment. If he goes and he works and the work doesn’t seem to pay off for him personally, he’s going to feel as if he’s wasted his time. So—*No! I’m not going! My father’s going to love me no matter what? Right? So why go?* And yet, the call of the father haunts him and taunts... until he changes his mind.

In the film, *Good Will Hunting*, there's a really great scene that features Matt Damon and Robin Williams. Damon plays the part of Will Hunting, a troubled young man, whose been abused in various foster homes, but who is nevertheless a prodigy in advanced mathematics. Williams plays Sean Maguire, the psychiatrist, whose been asked to help him grow up and put his brilliance to useful work in fighting terrorism for the C.I.A. But there's another risk at stake. And so, in this scene Will Hunting shares that he's met a girl; and she's just so "perfect" he doesn't want to ruin their connection by telling her about all the trauma and sadness in his life. He doesn't want to risk intimacy, which prompts his counselor to show him how he might. Sean then tells him the parable of his life: he and his friends had tickets to see the Boston Red Sox in the World Series, but while having a drink at a bar, Sean says, he saw the most stunning woman of his life and gave the ticket up. Will Hunting busts out, laughing—"You're kidding me." "No Will, I'm not kiddin' you," says Sean.

If I had gone to see that game I'd be in here talkin' about a girl I saw at a bar twenty years ago. And how I always regretted not goin' over there and talkin' to her. I don't regret the eighteen years we were married. I don't regret givin' up counseling for six years when she got sick. I don't regret being by her side for the last two years when things got real bad. And I sure as Hell don't regret missing that damn game.

Risk! I'm using that scene because maybe we're forgotten about the risks we've already taken—and where they're leading. It's one thing for me to come to a worship like this... or to stay at home or to attend a massive evangelical megachurch and sing, '*Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.*' But it's quite another thing for me to risk that message *AMONG, FOR* and *To* the people. And by the *people*, I mean persons like those of us here in this sanctuary, and those who will never show up here—generations and generations of people God loves despite the risk of being misunderstood.