

Here's how Chutes and Ladders work (just in case you've been living your entire life tucked away in some place where you haven't had an opportunity to play the board game Chutes and Ladders): the objective is to make it to the last space of the board, and along the way, you're hindered by slides or chutes and aided by ladders. It's a rather simple game, one that finds meaning for both our lives and faith. Here we are on the game board of life, rolling the dice, making decisions, climbing ladders, experiencing setbacks like getting into a car wreck, and going down a chute. Some chutes may be longer than others; there's a difference between a toothache and getting fired, for instance. Then there are ladders—times when we receive growth and excitement.

But you know what's crazy? Once you're at the top of the ladder, it's your turn again. You must spin the spinner or roll the die to find out where you'll continue. Will you go up yet another ladder, or will you end up sliding down a chute, finding yourself in a less than desirable position?

Call me crazy, but this game speaks volumes to our faith. The idea is that wherever you are in the game of life or in the board game, there's always the possibility that your actions will either benefit or hinder you. The game illustrates how little control we have and, by extension, our need for God. And at least for me, the game is a good reminder that even when I am at my lowest, even when I'm on the first tile of the game, God loves me just as much. It isn't my doing that raises me up the board and climbs ladders; it's God. And no matter how many chutes I may go down, the worst I can do is come back to the start. And the start for us as Christians is our baptism and the promise of God's love.

These comments aren't meant to make us passive; it's to remind us that not only is God always with us, but God is with us when we roll the dice, when we take chances. Perhaps this is why risk taking is fun in the abstract. It is always easy to talk about what one might do, but carrying through, rolling the dice - as it were, carries risk. Once the lot has been cast, one must react accordingly.

As a people of the Good Book – it is important to realize that our faith is one based, and built upon risk. Everything from the birth of Christ to the message Mary bore in her womb carried risk. *The Message we bear carries risk*. But praise be to God, this risk isn't ours alone to bare.

I said we're people of the Good Book, hear this – ***God honors radical, risk-taking faith***. When arks are built, lives are saved. When soldiers march, Jericho's walls tumble. When staffs are raised, seas are opened. When a lunch is shared,

thousands are fed. When a savior is executed, we are saved. The very concept of risk rests at the core of Christian faith.

Now for as many examples there are of God honoring radical risk-taking faith there are also examples of God enacting judgement on those who don't trust and obey. Generally speaking this occurs when the Israelites don't heed or trust God's commands, yet perhaps the most well-known instance of God enacting judgment comes when He asks Moses to speak to a rock in order to quench the thirst of the Israelites but in a moment of frustration Moses strikes the rock with his staff – the end result, he's banned from the promised land. He didn't get a do-over.

Following God is risky – it doesn't always end in the most predictable manner. Following Jesus, is no different. Following Jesus has always been a divine gift of risk and reward. Risk in that we accept a life not championed by our world, and reward in that we receive God's unending grace.

Risk!

This makes the conversion of Simon, Andrew, James, and John all the more remarkable, namely, because they took a divine risk. They were simply going about their days, and Jesus arrives saying, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Maybe they were curious, maybe they believed on the spot, whatever the case may have been, they took Jesus up on his offer and by doing so dropped everything; their job, their family – everything, and they followed.

What's so amazing about the call of Simon, Andrew, James and John was their reception to Jesus' message. One has to wonder, if they had any idea what Jesus meant when he said, "good news." Never mind the cryptic business about fishing for people – we'll get to that in a moment.

If I may be so bold, this concept is foreign to our space and time. I'm not even sure we can truly wrap our minds around what it means to drop everything in order to follow someone we just met, let alone the daunting task of finding time in a busy schedule to allow for divine risk.

At times, it seems that God's call is only something that fits into our busy lives, it doesn't have a chance to become our lives. And there will always be an excuse. *Jesus does not just ask [the disciples] to add one more task to their busy lives. He calls them into new ways of being. When Simon and Andrew leave their nets, they leave a way of life – they leave their livelihood. This is even clearer with James, and John, who leave not only their nets but also their father – and you know, I hope their father was proud.* It's hard enough going all-in with play money, let alone our own lives. And yet, this is what the disciples we're called to, and as Christians it is what we are called to!

If anything, this risky-faith boils down to being reoriented.

Following Jesus is like being blindfolded and spun around.

When Jesus called people to repent – that's exactly how they felt – everything that they had known, everything that they had been taught, was flipped on its head. Reorientation is almost universally met with resistance. But it is the

ministry to which we've been called. Since we've been given the analogy of fishing, let's take a quick look.

In my eyes, what reoriented my thinking about this fishing analogy is the premise it is based on. At its core fishing is based on deception. Ever think of that? By fishing you're essentially tricking a fish to eat a worm on a hook or you're using a lure that looks like a yummy meal. If we were to place this analogy in Biblical times, no such trickery was used, simply a giant net.

In using this imagery Jesus is saying not to attract people by way of gimmicks, but rather Jesus asks us to toss the net and take everything that's caught in the net. *Given that Jesus introduces the analogy of catching fish and catching people, can we make something of the reminder here that fishing involves more than the act of casting the net and pulling in the haul? There are also the preparations, the mending of nets, repairing the tools that are bound to be damaged and worn in the rough-and-tumble of their use. You can't always be fishing, even if that's your favorite part.*

So, what's so risky about tossing a net into the sea? – you don't know what you'll catch – but the net needs to be thrown. And the net must also be prepared – much like we need to be prepared, learning what our God has planned for us, hearing God's word in all aspects of our lives, and living that call. You see, the Good News is that we've already been caught, we're in the net like the disciples, but being caught up by God is only the beginning. ***Becoming a Christian disciple takes both a moment and a lifetime.*** A moment of being caught and a lifetime of both teaching others how to fish and accompanying others while they fish. It is at once the easiest and hardest part of this life. We embrace God's call in a moment of faith but accept a lifetime of responsibility – and what's more, we also accept a lifetime of change.

This morning Jesus is calling us to go all in. Jesus *is* calling for sacrifice. Anything less covers us in cheap grace. But the sacrifice Jesus invites us to become is a fulfilling sacrifice –a sacrifice for the sake of others. We are called to give of ourselves so that the lives of others can be filled more fully.

So, ask yourselves, are there things that we need to drop in order to follow Jesus more closely? How is God calling us to be reoriented today?

Jesus and these four disciples give us an example of what it means to trust God in a risky, precarious world, which such expression of trust can easily appear out of touch with reality. *Faith does not shut its eyes to the assaults that afflict us. It does not place its trust in those who seem to be the "winners" in the game of life. Faith clings to and relies on the living God alone [and] this faith enables us, God's people of faith to "wait for the Lord" not in passive resignation, but in eager expectation of the one who is our rock and salvation.*

How have you been risky lately?

-Amen