

Playing It Safe Doesn't Lead to Freedom (MT 25:14:30)

Sermon Given by the Rev. Corinne Hodges

November 16, 2008, St. John of the Cross

Play it Safe. Three simple words almost all of us have heard before...from our parents, grandparents, friends, teachers, siblings or society. Play it safe. The intention behind this message is often good. Our loved ones do not want to see us hurt; they want to prevent us from going through the same pains they experienced in their own lives; they want to protect us, shield us. They know these words will stick in our minds and remind us to be careful.

Play it safe. Others may offer these words as a way to stop us in our tracks. Perhaps out of competition, fear that we may excel or raise the bar on expectations. Let's face it...some people just don't enjoy seeing us do well. They find it threatening and, therefore, rather than encourage us to explore and go for it, they remind us that we may fall, fail or make a mistake. They remind us of our own insecurity, which brings us to perhaps the loudest voice telling us to play it safe...our very own.

There are many reasons why we tell ourselves to be cautious. Today, with so many of us experiencing a loss of security, it makes rational sense to pull back, preserve what we have and avoid risk. After all, it's a whole lot easier to take a chance when things are plentiful and we can afford a loss. Wasn't it easier for the first slave to take a chance with ten talents than it was for the third slave who only had one? When things are uncertain, we are less adventurous and trusting. Learning to risk at such unstable and vulnerable times can feel like diving off the edge a diving board...into the land of the great unknown.

Can you remember the very first time you took a dive off the diving board, jumped off the edge of the pool, or perhaps even the first time you walked into a lake or the ocean? As a child, I have to admit that I was never a risk taker. Being the oldest, I was always envious of my younger brother, the more agile, athletic and popular one. One summer, I remember hanging on to the side of the pool in Swimming 3 class, while my little brother graduated to Swimming 5. Now getting to Swimming 5 was a big deal, not only because you got to go off the diving board, but because you got to go off the “high dive.” Diving off the high dive was a very scary thing...it involved more than just looking up at that 15-foot tall monster; it involved stepping up every single step of the ladder and not turning back, holding the railings and nervously walking the length of the platform, then putting your hands in position, and diving in...head first.

Diving off the high dive was not something I necessarily wanted to do, yet as I experienced the following summer, it was something I needed to do to overcome my fears and experience true freedom. This lesson is one I continue to learn as an adult. For life presents all kinds of scary opportunities, “high dives” that we can say either yes or no to. Our instincts and teachings may tell us it’s better to be safe than sorry, but this is not the message we hear in today’s Gospel.

Jesus reminds us that living without risk is not living at all. We cannot live the life of the third slave, burying our heads in the sand, looking the other way and playing it safe. No, we are called to a life of active responsibility and this involves a certain amount of risk. We must stand up, step out and dive into whatever opportunity God is

presenting us with. This means not only contemplating it, it means walking the path, letting go of our fears, and then actually jumping off...jumping off in faith that God will sustain us no matter what lies ahead. God will be there to help and we will not have to go at it alone.

Years ago, I remember hearing a story about a man who had a dream that he had died and gone to heaven. When it came time for him to meet his creator, he was brought to a room where there were many shelves which held millions and millions of boxes. The man asked God what the boxes were for and then God showed him that each box had a person's name on it. The man asked if there was one for him and God replied yes. The man asked what was in it and God proceeded to show him, opening the box and displaying all the missed opportunities in the man's life. It's important to note that the box did not contain his mistakes and errors. It held only the empty times, when he could have done something really great with what God had given him, but for whatever reason—fear, preoccupation with other things, his own set agenda—he did not.

What high dive is God placing in front of you at this point in your life? What one risk can you take that will help build up God's Kingdom here on earth? Perhaps it is reaching out to a stranger, someone who is hurting or lonely...maybe it's inviting someone we don't particularly like over for a visit or coffee. Maybe a big risk for you is forgiving someone you just have not been able to, enlarging our hearts to accept someone when our habit is to close them off and keep to ourselves.

It's scary putting ourselves out there, taking risks and making ourselves vulnerable. But once we move past our fears, we will experience tremendous freedom. When I think back to that day that I was finally able to overcome my fright on the high dive, I remember the tremendous joy I experienced. Right after I landed in the water, you know what the next thing I had to do was? Climb right back up that ladder and do it again. The more we trust God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the more we are willing to take risks. Faith instills freedom and we can finally experience the great joy of our master.