

Take Holy Risks

A number of years ago, I had the chance to visit the Holocaust museum in Washington, DC. It was both deeply troubling and moving at the same time. The Holocaust, like so many atrocities, shows us both the very worst and the very best of humanity. I was moved by the resiliency and sheer toughness of so many Jewish communities. I was moved by how some even wrote prayers of forgiveness for those who were slaughtering them. The Christian church has a mixed history in relation to the Holocaust. Too many times, the church was complicit or even on the side of Nazis. But there were some moving exceptions, one in particular involved the Greek Orthodox church and one of its leaders Dimitrios Chrysostomos.

On September 9, 1943, a German force landed on the island of Zakynthos (Zakynthos). The German commander ordered the Greek mayor to provide him with a list of the local Jews, so that they could be deported to the mainland and from there to the concentration camps in Poland. The mayor went to the local church leader, Metropolitan Dimitrios Chrysostomos for help and Chrysostomos volunteered to negotiate with the Germans. But before he went to meet with the German commander, he burned the list of the island's 275 Jews. He then approached the German commander and implored him not to deport the Jews. The Jews were Greek citizens, he argued. They had done no harm to their neighbors and did not deserve to be punished by deportation. When the Germans would not listen and insisted upon receiving the list of all the local Jews, Chrysostomos took a piece of paper and handed it over with a note saying, "Here is the list of Jews you require." The note had only one name on it: Dimitrio Chrysostomos.

Today, our theme as we continue the book of Acts is Taking Holy Risks. Because of the risk Chrysostomos was willing to take, most of the island's Jews were saved during the Holocaust. There is no doubt that what Chrysostomos did was the right thing to do. However, just because the right thing was fairly obvious, it certainly wasn't easy; it was a risk that could have cost him his life.

Now, Chrysostomos is certainly not the only person I could have picked as an example of someone who was willing to take a risk. In fact, I could have picked someone much more well-known like Dietrich Bonhoeffer who risked everything (and gave his life) to stand against the Nazis. Or I could have picked people from the United States – someone like Rosa Parks or Martin Luther King, Jr.

But I wanted to pick Chrysostomos precisely because he is not well-known. In fact, I daresay it's a safe bet to say that probably none of you have heard of him before this morning. I hadn't heard of him until I visited the Holocaust museum. So often, when we think about people willing to take risks, really famous people come to mind, and there's nothing wrong with that. But I think it's really important to also know that people who otherwise wouldn't be in the history books also took risks, that there are plenty of people who had tremendous courage that we don't know about, and yet, their willingness to risk has had a profound impact even if we're not aware of that impact.

Our Scripture reading today is about just search a person. The story of Saul's conversion (who later became Paul) is one of the most well-known stories we have in the New Testament. Paul would go on to write more than ½ of the New Testament. Immediately before our Scripture today, we read that Saul was on the road to Damascus to arrest those who were following Jesus. On the road, he had a vision and Jesus appeared to him. As I said, it's one of the most well-known stories we have in our Scripture. But the first person Saul encountered after his conversion, Ananias, is one of the least known characters we have. In fact, this story is the only time Ananias is mentioned in all of Scripture. We don't know anything else about him other than that he was a Christian living in Damascus who God asked to go and meet Saul after his conversion.

Now this was an incredibly scary proposition for Ananias. Prior to his conversion, Saul's mission in life was to hunt down Christians and see that they were either jailed or killed. He was so successful at this in Jerusalem, that a great number of Christians fled elsewhere. But Saul pursued them. In fact, the whole reason he was on the road to Damascus in the first place was to find Christians (people like Ananias) and arrest them. We can assume he had an armed guard travelling with him to take people by force if necessary.

Ananias knew all about Saul. When God asked him to go to Saul, he responded by saying, "I've heard all about this man...I've heard what he's done to our people in Jerusalem. And I know he's coming here to do the same to us." My guess is that Ananias and other Christians in Damascus had spent a great deal of time thinking and planning for how to NOT have an encounter with Saul and, then, God specifically tells Ananias to go directly to him.

This was something unbelievably scary that God was asking Ananias to do. And yet, Ananias took the risk. He went to Saul and was the first person to mentor Saul as he transformed into Paul, perhaps the greatest evangelist and apostle we've had. In fact, as Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles, it is entirely possible that Christianity would have never spread beyond a small group of Jewish people had not Ananias took a risk and went to mentor Saul. We might not be here this morning. And if it's true that Paul had that type of impact, then it is also true that Paul was only able to have that impact because Ananias was willing to take a risk to go and meet him.

So the first thing we learn from this story is that we should never underestimate the potential impact of a single courageous act. A single risk that Ananias was able to take changed the course of Christianity and continues to impact the world...continues to impact you and me. Friends, we never know the impact we might have on another person, especially when we are willing to do something that seems risky.

And so, I want us to spend a little bit of time seeing what we can learn from Ananias' willingness to take a risk.

First, Ananias ultimately chose trust over fear. Now, I doubt you and I have the benefit of God speaking directly to us telling us what to do as this story tells about God's direction to Ananias. Rarely have I had that clarity. However, I do think we have clarity around the ways of God – for example we are called to love, called to work for peace and justice, called to try to make this world a better place for everyone, and sometimes doing those things requires that we take a risk. To live by faith doesn't mean we're not scared. But it does mean that we trust that God's way is the ultimate reality. We trust that love really is stronger than hate, peace really is more powerful than violence, that justice will prevail over injustice. In that sense, when we are willing to take a risk, then we do so trusting that sooner or later, God's way will win out.

Secondly, Ananias was able to move past his fear of Paul and see Paul as a human. So often, when we fear another person, it is so easy to dehumanize them. I imagine Ananias thought of Saul in that sort of way – he was evil, he was violent, he was a murderer. And yet, Ananias was able to move past his fear. When he finally met Saul, he addressed him as “brother.” “Brother Saul,” he said, “The Lord Jesus sent me here to you.” Think about this for a minute. Ananias named the person who was travelling to Damascus to arrest him as his brother, as part of his family. Not only was he able to see him as a fellow human being, he was able to see him as a member of his family. If we are going to take risks, we have to be able to see the humanity of those whom we fear.

Finally, Ananias learned that the consequences of his risk were not as bad as he thought they would be. Now, I wish this last point was always and universally true, but you and I both know that it's not. But I do think it is usually true. A long time justice activist told me one time that in her experience, the consequences for doing the right thing are often not nearly as bad as we fear they might be. So while we can't promise that everything will work out like we want it to, maybe we can choose to not always assume the worst when the right thing seems like a hard thing.

Now before we end, I want to say one more thing about the kinds of risk that we are called to take. In the story of Ananias, it's not an understatement to say that he was risking his life by going to Saul. The same is true about the story of Dimitrios Chrysostomos. And I think usually, when we think about people who take great risk, we often think of people who risk everything. And while I greatly admire those people and if I'm ever placed in that situation, I hope I will have the courage to follow their example; however, for most of us, the risks we are called to take often do not have life and death consequences, but are no less important.

For example, it's risky to be willing to have a hard conversation to save a relationship or to confront a loved one who may be engaging in destructive behavior or even to honestly look at changes we might need to make so that we can live a more healthy life. For risks that do not have life or death consequences, they still have fear associated with them – fear of losing a relationship, fear of an angry response, fear of failure. And the easy thing to do is to always give in to that fear and not take the risk – even if we know it's the right thing to do.

And not only for us as individuals, but the same is true for us as a church. Things are going pretty good for us at FCC Milton right now. It would be easy to just keep doing what we're currently doing. But I think God is calling us to always look for more ways to reach out, even if it feels risky. After all, that is our story for a long time. It was risky to build the Centre School after 9/11. It was risky to renovate the basement and turn it into the Wildcat Den. But on the other side, we now know that those risks were worth it. My guess is that we will be called to take more risks as we go forward – it's kind of what God does – call people and communities out into the unknown, asking us to trust even when it's scary and hard.

So I hope we can learn from Ananias – both as individuals and as a church – and be willing to take those risks we need to take, to have the conversations we need to have, to say the things we need to say, to stand up with those who have been hurt. And I hope we will do so trusting that God has already overcome. And I hope we will do so always remembering the humanity of those we fear.

Ananias was scared. But he didn't let his fear stop him from doing the right thing. And the world was forever changed. May we too be willing to risk in such a way. Amen.