

Learning to Fly
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To talk about the future is to risk being really, truly, amazingly wrong. When the 50th Anniversary committee met last spring to begin planning for this fall, we decided to have a sermon series in which Bill Baughn, Will Saunders, and I, the congregation's three ministers, would each give a sermon. When we met this fall to figure out what to ask each minister to talk about, the obvious three-part division was to have one sermon about the congregation's past, one about the present, and one about the future. And, of course, it made the most sense for Bill to talk about the past, Will to talk about the present – meaning, the congregation since the move to this space, - and it made the most sense for me to talk about the future of the congregation.

So, to me it falls the task of looking forward. And as any of you know who have listened to predictions in such areas as technology, space travel, election outcomes, sports, or even weather, the task of predicting is precarious. To talk about the future is to risk being really, truly, amazingly wrong.

And so, to accomplish this impossible task, I'm going to cheat a bit. I'm going to begin by looking backward.

During this fall with all the activity surrounding the celebrations of the 50th anniversary of our congregation, I've heard some truly amazing stories. I knew the bare bones of these stories before this year, but I'm hearing some of the details for the first time.

The first of these stories is the story of a tiny fellowship and a minister who guest preached occasionally and then with more and more frequency. Rev. Bill Baughn eventually issued the congregation a challenge. Do these 10 things, and I'll preach twice a month and charge you for one sermon a month. This was an extraordinary act of leadership and generosity. And when we tell the story, we often focus on him as a catalyst for change, which he was.

But there is a second extraordinary aspect to this story. The congregation sat in one big circle and discussed this proposal. You agreed to his 10 conditions, several of which meant real, fundamental change to the congregational culture. These included meeting every Sunday and passing a basket for offerings at each service. And you all agreed to these conditions unanimously.

The act of saying yes to Bill was a risk. All change is a risk. To change so many things all at once was a big risk. You might have failed. You might have succeeded but become a new entity that none of you recognized. Certainly, taking up a challenge like this means moving out of your comfort zone. The membership of the church doubled within a few years. That is a pretty radical change, and radical changes always involve risk.

Several years later, the congregation was issued another challenge. Chuck and Linda offered to purchase our current building and rent it to the fellowship for a small fee for 2 years. The conditions this time included instituting a yearly pledge drive, investing the time and energy to do the renovation work on the building, and calling a consulting minister.

Well, if Bill's challenge involved risk, Chuck and Linda's challenge was an even bigger risk. Hiring a minister is a significant financial commitment, and the change to having an annual pledge campaign was another change to the congregation's culture. The congregation also took on a huge risk by moving to a more public location. People can now walk by. People might now walk *in*. This is what the congregation wanted, but again, with every radical change there is risk.

All of these things, all of the conditions to both challenges, involved change. Not little, incremental, tentative change, but big, quick, and dramatic change. In the last 10 years, the congregation's membership has more than tripled. Your relationship to money has changed. You now have ordained ministry as part of the congregation's culture. You are more public, and more known than ever before. I would imagine that the experience of coming to worship in the fellowship feels radically different this morning than it did back in 1999, when Bill issued his challenge.

What I find most remarkable about this story is that you do not find it remarkable. When I have said to some of you this fall that I am just so amazed at the way this history has unfolded, you say back to me some version of, "But this wasn't so amazing. We just accepted the challenges and opportunities that were given to us."

So, let me tell you that you are, indeed remarkable. Most congregations – most human institutions of any kind – resist change with incredible ferocity. They especially resist dramatic, sudden change. Most congregations are incredibly risk averse. Many, many congregations would have decided not to take either one of these challenges, let alone both.

Each time the congregation has accepted a challenge or taken a risk represents a leap of faith. When I was in seminary, I came across an anonymous saying that is the best definition of faith that I've ever found:

When you have come to the end of all the light you know, and are about to step off into the darkness of the unknown, faith is knowing that one of two things will happen. There will be something to stand on, or you will be taught to fly.

Many congregations do not have that kind of faith. When they get to the end of all the light they know and are faced with the darkness of the unknown, they turn around and head back to the familiar lighted past.

This congregation is different. This congregation is remarkable. This congregation has a faith that I find truly inspirational. And I have another reason for being grateful that this is a congregation that takes chances.

Let me tell you another part of your story. Your first encounter with ordained ministry was in the person of Bill Baughn, a man with a long career in ministries of various sorts behind him, someone with quite a bit of experience. When you found your first consulting minister, it was in the person of Will Saunders, who came out of retirement to serve this congregation. Another man with a long history of ministry to draw on.

When looking for your third minister, you found me. I am a brand-new minister, and my joint ministry in Rutland and Bennington is my first foray into ordained ministry. Not only am I at the beginning of my career, but I am far younger than your two previous ministers. I'm a woman. I'm a lesbian. (And my name doesn't fit the rhyming scheme.) Calling me involved change, and therefore, calling me was a risk. You decided to take a chance on a new, untried, young minister. And I'm very glad that you did!

So, let me say to you on this weekend when we celebrate the congregation's 50th Anniversary: Congratulations! Congratulations on 50 years of congregational life. Congratulations on continually choosing to step off into the darkness of the unknown. Congratulations on the times when you've found new ground to stand on. And congratulations on learning to fly.

Okay, so much for looking backward. Let's get back to looking ahead! Here is my prediction for the future of this congregation. I would venture to guess that you are not done coming to the edge of the light of the known. I would suspect that you will have many more opportunities to step into the darkness of the unknown.

We are already in the very early stages of planning for a process to become a Welcoming Congregation. A Welcoming Congregation (capital letters), is a congregation that is intentional about welcoming gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people into the congregation. The process involves education, and most importantly, conversation in the congregation. This is risky, too. Talking deeply about any issue of congregational culture, social justice, or theology involves stepping into unknown territory. Every newcomer to a congregation changes things slightly, and the Welcoming Congregation aims to invite in many new people.

Another challenge involves membership growth. The congregation is currently growing at about 10% a year. If this continues, and I believe it could very well continue, you will eventually grow to a size that will mandate a very different congregational culture. When a congregation gets big enough, it is suddenly no longer possible to know everyone in the congregation. When that happens, you will have to decide whether to accept that challenge, and create a new way of being that will support it, or whether to refuse that challenge, in which case, your membership will probably shrink again.

At some point in the future, especially if growth continues, you will face a decision about more ordained ministry. Do you want half-time or even full-time ministry? At that point, you will probably be looking for a settled minister, rather than a consulting minister. That will mean making a long-term commitment to a minister who will make a long-term commitment to you. Long-term commitments also involve risk, and involve stepping together off into unknown territory.

Each of these potential areas of risk and challenge involve stepping off into the darkness of the unknown. Right now, you are a congregation that takes the risks and challenges that come your way. With every challenge you accept, you become more deeply invested in the culture of accepting challenges. With every risk you take, you become more deeply a congregation that takes risk. With every step into the unknown, you become a more faithful congregation, that is more and more a congregation that understands that there will be ground or flight.

When I was in seminary, I wrote a sermon about risk for my preaching class. I want to tell you the story with which I began that sermon.

The mosaic had taken all semester. Week after week, the artist had carefully selected, cut, and glued the colorful tiles, meticulously creating the Celtic knot design. And all that hard work had paid off – it was beautiful. Six “strands” of bright colors stood out against a black background. They all crossed each other, seeming to weave or intertwine. Truly, it was already a work of art. But it still wasn’t complete. Something was missing. Bits of white from the base still showed in the spaces between the tiles. It needed the final step: grouting.

Carefully following her teacher’s instructions, the artist stirred water into the grout mix creating a black cement. She then smeared it over the mosaic, leaving all those brilliant colors dulled to shades of gray. Then, she left it to wait for the fifteen minutes it would take for the grout to set.

And she began to worry. What if she waited too long and the grout never came off? What if she discovered upon washing the mosaic that she should have grouted in white, or gray? What if she had just destroyed the piece that had taken such long hours to create?

Heather, an artist and a seminary friend of mine, calls this moment the *Craftsmanship of Risk*. This is a term she borrowed from David Pye’s book *Nature and the Art of Workmanship*. It is the moment you risk all that you have worked so hard on for the chance that the next step will produce the masterpiece you are hoping for. This risk is necessary in the act of creation. Nothing is completed without it. In painting, each new layer may be the step that goes too far and ruins the integrity of the piece. In quilting, one must trust that the final quilting stitches will pull everything together rather than distract from the beauty of the piecing or appliqué. It is always scary. Yet without this step, the masterpiece cannot emerge.

After the fifteen minutes of anxious waiting, the artist washed away the grout covering the tops of the tiles. The colors emerged again, brilliant as before, and even more so against the dark grout. Now, it was complete. The risk had indeed been the right one.

I wrote this sermon for people and congregations who hesitate at that moment of risk. But when this congregation gets to the moment of grouting, the moment of risk, you step of boldly into the unknown. You grout with gusto! And so far, every time you have done that, your faith has been justified. In fact, given the amount of change implied in the risks you have taken, in this metaphor, you find yourself flying more often than not.

So, I predict that you will continue to take big risks and accept big challenges. And because I am also a person of faith, I believe that most of the time, you will find ground or you will learn new flight techniques. And as long as this remains true, I believe you will continue to accept challenges and to take risks.

But I wouldn't be calling all of these things risks if a good outcome were certain. Every time you accept a challenge or make a change, you are taking a risk, and that means that there is a chance that it won't work out. There is a chance that you will call a minister who is a bad fit for the congregation, and end up smaller. There is a chance that a large influx of new people will make the longer-term members so uncomfortable that they will decide not to stay. There is a chance that being more publically known will open you to more public criticism and controversy.

I hope that you will always find that your risks pay off, but you may come to a time as a congregation when accepting a new challenge sends you off course. You may someday find that the grout was the wrong color – or worse, that it won't come off the tiles.

The challenge if this happens will be to keep being a faithful congregation. The challenge if this happens will be in taking the next risk that comes your way. It will be a challenge to hold onto the spirit of adventure that is yours now if the adventure takes you into a place that isn't where you wanted to go.

Let religion be to us voice of renewing challenge to the best we have and my be; Let it be a call to generous action. Let religion be to us a dissatisfaction with things that are, which bids us serve more eagerly the true and right. Let religion be to us the wonder and lure of that which is only partly known and understood. Let it be to us a discovering of opportunities.

Right now, the faith of this congregation is all those things. The religion of this congregation is an adventure – a call to take risks and accept challenges, a call to continuous transformation. Right now, this congregation is remarkable in its faith, in its spirit of willingness to step off into the darkness. Right now, this day, this congregation celebrates a history of courageous and bold action in response to challenge.

So, how can this congregation continue this spirit of adventure and faith come what may? If adversity should come, or a risk be made that proves not to have been worth it, how shall the congregation's spirit of faith stay alive and well? How can we be prepared? Well, as Kalidasa tells us,

Look to this day.
For yesterday is but a dream
And tomorrow is only a vision;
But today, well lived, makes every yesterday
A dream of happiness
And every tomorrow a vision of hope.
Look well, therefore, to this day.

The best way to ensure that this congregation will continue to live faithfully is to live faithfully today. With every risk taken that proves to have been life-giving, the life of the congregation grows stronger. With every day lived in a spirit of adventure, the life of adventure is more deeply ingrained in our collective life. With every challenge accepted, the acceptance of the next challenge becomes more certain. And with every bit of ground discovered, or every lesson learned about flying, the greater will be the resources of the congregation to withstand adversity.

My message today comes down to this. You are a remarkable congregation. You have a spirit of adventure and of faith that is clearly visible, unique, and inspiring. Keep this spirit alive, and there is nothing you can't do together. Congratulations! Keep up the good work.

Amen.