

Betting the Farm by The Rev. Barbara Merritt 10/22/2017
Sermon delivered at First Unitarian Church of Worcester
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Readings:

Mathew 13: 44-46

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it."

James Baldwin

Most people live in almost total darkness... people, millions of people whom you will never see, who don't know you, never will know you, people who may try to kill you in the morning, live in a darkness ...you (the artist) are responsible to those people to lighten, and it does not matter what happens to you. You are being used in the way a crab is useful, the way sand certainly has some function. It is impersonal. This force which you didn't ask for, and this destiny which you must accept, is also your responsibility. And if you survive it, if you don't cheat, if you don't lie,..(you, the) artist can tell, what it is like for anyone who gets to this planet to survive it. What it is like to die, or to have somebody die; what it is like to be glad...the price that the artist has to pay himself and that you, the audience, must also pay, is a willingness to give up everything, to realize that although you spent twenty-seven years acquiring this house, this furniture, this position, although you spent forty years raising this child, these children, nothing, none of it belongs to you. You can only have it by letting it go. You can only take if you are prepared to give, and giving is not an investment. It is not a day at the bargain counter. It is a total risk of everything, of you and who you think you are, who you think you'd like to be, where you think you'd like to go — everything, and this forever, forever.

Sermon

The world feels especially risky right now:

- with North Korea,
- with the leaders we have elected in our own country,
- with the way people of color are often treated by our institutions,
- the way women are treated by men with power,
- the way the planet is being treated by the forces of global warming.

This is a risky planet, when it comes to hurricanes and floods and wildfires and earthquakes. This is a place, (at least in the USA) where insane sociopaths have easy access to automatic weapons and endless ammunition. This is a planet with famine and ethnic cleansing and mudslides. You know the list and it is seemingly endless. And these risks don't even take into account the garden variety of challenges like disease, death and having your computer crash.

Perhaps a wiser choice for a sermon subject would be to steer *away* from the terrible dimensions of risk and move swiftly and sweetly in the direction of comfort and consolation. Perhaps we should seek the safe harbor and some dependable, rock-solid certainties of living.

But we Unitarian Universalists are, (by nature and temperament) skeptical of slick bromides and empty promises. No matter how many religions claim that if you only believe this or that doctrine, you will be saved; no matter how many financial counselors tell you, “only accumulate *this* amount of money, you will have a safe and predictable retirement”; no matter how many politicians promise that they can guarantee a smooth way forward, we know in our hearts and minds and souls that human existence is an inherently risky business. It is likely to bring sorrow, (along with joy.) Life is always unpredictable. We will have moments when it seems that nothing could go wrong. And there will be moments when it feels like nothing will ever go right again.

I went apple picking last week. And there was a Macoun tree in an old orchard and on one branch (at my shoulder height), in the space of about 2 square feet, were 25 perfect apples. They were all ripe and ready for the picking. And I asked my husband, Jeffrey, “Why can’t life always be like this? Easy! Abundant! Effortless!?” It is a lovely fantasy. Only sometimes our metaphorical apples are damaged by storms or worms. Sometimes we see only scarcity and absence.

And no matter how much we may want to be in control and/or only make safe investments with our time, talent and services, the reality is that we don’t know what lies ahead. We don’t know what will happen to us this *afternoon*. We don’t know what will occur in our country this *week*. We don’t know anything about the future! Every step forward is a risk and requires courage. We are always embarking on an adventure into the unknown.

What you might not be aware of, is that when it comes to the life of the spirit, the saints and masters and prophets have all claimed that this risk-taking, (giving freely, betting the farm, going all in) is a good thing. Risk-taking is a blessing, and a calling that is meant to focus our attention and move us forward.

Please note—Jesus did not say that the kingdom of heaven could be obtained by the judicious and temperate investment of one hour of worship on Sunday morning. Instead, he recommended *selling all you have*. What is truly worthwhile, (the pearl of great price) requires a lifetime of devotion, the sacrifice of *everything* you hold dear, the willingness to surrender all that you currently claim as your own. What is the price of being saved, of being whole, of union with God? *Very, very expensive*. As T.S. Elliot put it in *Little Gidding*, “Costing not less than everything”.

Now, in a materialistic culture like our own, you might easily dismiss Jesus and his ilk as proponents of religious fanaticism—an extreme and impractical relic from an earlier and more superstitious era. But then we encounter James Baldwin, who

describes the experience of being an artist in exactly the same terms. What is the price for shedding light on the human condition? He writes, it is “*a willingness to give up everything... this is not an investment or something you can bargain about... it is a total risk of everything*”.

The definition of risk in the dictionary is, *to expose, to hazard or danger, to venture boldly*. What makes the life of the spirit and life on earth such a high-risk venture? It is because what surrounds us is so vast and unbelievable! (And our own imaginations and minds and experiences are so limited that we can only *guess*.) We can only make observations and proceed forward into the unknown with the best of our ability and intentions, with whatever guidance we have been given. We gather the hints and disciplines that make sense to us.

What I am personally betting the farm on, spiritually, is that at the heart of reality is something beneficent. There is some immense love, joy, goodness, something I call “God”. This is at the center of everything I believe. I cannot know, at this point whether this is true. Still, I have staked my life on it. This belief about reality is what gives me purpose, direction and hope. But this is only my personal answer about the meaning of life. Each of us has to find our own answer. Each of us is required to make our own risky guess.

The scientist, Albert Einstein was placing all of his chips on the ideas that he claimed lighted his way and gave him the courage to go on: These ideas were “*kindness, beauty and truth*.” (I can’t help but notice that he put kindness first.)

James Baldwin didn’t put God at the center of his life. His first priority was social justice and service to his fellow human beings. He described that pursuit as trying to bring light into the darkness of the human struggle. His work was to try to establish the connection between human beings, in the common experience of being glad and facing death and overcoming brutal circumstances.

In the brilliant documentary about Baldwin, *I Am Not Your Negro*, he describes the difficult choices he had to face about where he was placing his bets, his life, and his energy. He was personal friends with Martin Luther King Jr. and Medgar Evers and they wanted him (pleaded with him) to march with them, to protest, to man the barricades. But Baldwin knew that this was not his role to play. He needed to give everything he had into being the observer, to being the witness, the writer, the artist. He didn’t deny the legitimate claims of other paths to social justice. But he knew what he had been called to do. And he answered that call with all of his heart and mind and soul.

Thomas Merton wrote that we need to be “*heroically faithful*” to that call—to what ultimately matters to us. But once we understand what we have committed our lives to, we should be careful not to assume that this will make our life easier or smoother or safer!

When I was a practicing minister, I can’t tell you the number of times I heard

(usually at funerals, from agnostics and atheists) these words. “I wish I could believe in God, (or in an afterlife, or in reincarnation). It would be so comforting at times like this.” As if your heart wouldn’t be quite as broken, if you had a different theology. As if there was a belief system that could provide you with security, comfort and immediate consolation.

I would like to introduce you to Bullah Shah, a 17th century Indian Sufi poet. Over 400 years ago he dedicated his entire life to God, to the divine, to his Beloved. There was nothing more real to him than God. There was nothing he wanted except God-realization. And this is how he described his experience as a seeker, as a devotee, as a disciple. He asks God,

*What confidence can I have in Your love?
You had Jonah swallowed by a whale.
You had Joseph sold in Egypt.
You made Job’s body food for worms
John the Baptist came to be known as your friend
For you alone he was inflamed with love.
And yet you got his head severed with a saw!
What confidence can I have in your love?*

*Your love is a total calamity....
I have a quarrel to pick only with God
Who has pierced me with the spear of His love.
I am surrounded by the eddies of the whirlpool
And God just watches, unconcerned,
Standing at the shore...
He who enslaves all hearts
Throws water at me while I drown in the river.*

*O Friends, love was implanted in me...
from the day of eternity
It fries me again and again in a pan
And fries again what is already fried.
The already dead, it crucifies again.*

Bullah Shah is my kind of a mystic: complaining, accusing, impatient. And while he eventually found union and everything that he had been searching for, he left behind for us his poetry which describes just how risky and dangerous the passage can be.

James Baldwin told the artist, and all who are creatively engaged with life, you must give everything you have. There are no bargain basement deals. His dear friends would be assassinated and the work would never be completed. No matter. The life of the artist requires such sacrifices.

I love Vincent Van Gogh’s description of the risk of being an artist—of being any kind of human being at all. He wrote to his brother Theo, in 1884:

You don't know how paralyzing it is, that stare from a blank canvas that says to the painter, you can't do anything. The canvas has an idiotic stare, and mesmerizes some painters so that they turn into idiots themselves.

Many painters are afraid of the blank canvas, but the blank canvas is afraid of the truly passionate painter who dares — and who has once broken the spell of “you can't.”

Likewise, life itself always turns towards one an infinitely meaningless, discouraging, dispiriting blank side on which there is nothing, any more than on a blank canvas. But ... the person of faith, of energy, of warmth, and who knows something, doesn't let himself be fobbed off like that. He steps in and does something, and hangs on to that....

Just consider the beauty, the light that Van Gogh's paintings have given to the world. Because he was able to say to his blank canvas “Yes, I can!” Whoever is willing to act has ventured far into the unknown. And then, whatever you love, whomever you love will ask pretty much everything from you.

No parent can ever say to his or her young child, “I have allotted 40% of my time to you, no more and no less.”

No musician can say, “I love music, but I don't like to practice, so I won't be doing any of that.”

Every one of us is presented with this blank canvas of our lives. Each of us has to break the spell that says, “You can't”. We discover that we have to pour our faith, our energy, our warmth, our passion into the things we can do. The things we are called to do. The things we must do.

Can you love God, no matter what? Can you be an artist and create those connections that bring light and beauty and hope to your fellow travelers? Or perhaps you are called to be a humanist, to love your brothers and sisters. *Have you ever met a human being?!* They are not always easy to love.

If you become paralyzed and refuse to become an active participant in this risky business known as life then there are severe penalties. Writer, Steven Pressfield warns that a terrible fate awaits you. He says it might lead to a life of crime, or drug addiction or surfing the web. (I love how he lists these possibilities as morally equivalent.)

So, assuming we are willing to bet the farm and enter fully into the dangerous and rewarding and baffling and wonderful and terrible unknown, how are we to proceed? I would suggest three provisions for the journey. 1) gratitude, 2) a willingness to receive help and 3) developing the capacity to actually enjoy these ongoing adventures into the vast unknown.

It begins with gratitude. We are asked to be thankful that we have the chance to devote our lives to something worthwhile. We need simply to be aware of all that we have been given, recognizing the good fortune that accompanies us along the way.

Long ago, I told a story from this pulpit. Having read it multiple times to myself and once out loud at first Unitarian, it still somehow always makes me gasp. So repeating this story this morning may be only a sign of your rapidly aging Minister Emerita, or it may be that I have finally figured out that some stories bear repeating.

There was, once upon a time, a blind beggar standing in a park. His cup was empty. He was looking forlorn. A man comes along and asks him, "What's wrong?" The beggar explains that he is hungry and no one will give him money. The man takes out a piece of paper, writes a few words on it, hangs the paper around the beggar's neck and departs. The man comes back a few hours later and the blind man's cup is overflowing. The beggar thanks him profusely and asks him what on earth he wrote on that sign to have moved people to such generosity? The man replied, "All I wrote was, "It is autumn in New England and I am blind."

Here's the confession. I no longer think this is a story about a visually impaired beggar and our compassion for the unfortunate. Rather it is a parable about our own sightlessness, our own inability to see that even in the midst of the unknown and the danger and the darkness, there is a love and a beauty and a kindness that walks with us. We constantly need to remember the spiritual discipline of gratitude.

Second? The willingness to receive help: from God, from friends, from family, from strangers. Why? Because none of us have the capital to purchase the pearl of great price all by ourselves. We will need to rely on the forgiveness of others. We will need to rely on the kindness of everyone (or almost everyone). When we fall, when we falter, when the darkness gets too close, we will need to rely on grace. In the midst of pain, when confronted by daunting challenges, when we have no idea how we can move forward, in other words, when we run out of money, reserves and strategies, we will need help. When we are spiritually dead broke and even when words and understanding fail us, we can get help. We can be reached. Sometimes all it takes is a song. (Or so claims Anne Lamott, from *Halleluiah, Anyway*).

*I stayed uncomfortable and understanding next to nothing.
But the choir, the choir fed me until I heard the words I needed.
Their voices were like a life raft in choppy waters.
And the lightweight boat held me.
And the harmonies of words I couldn't make sense of,
Gave voice to a beauty inside me-
Which I could not yet access and which I could not possibly have made myself.*

(choir sings, "In the Midst of Pain")

And finally, *Joy*. Enjoy this adventure into the unknown. As the poet Antonio Machado writes, “*anyone who moves forward—even a little—is like Jesus walking on the water.*”

Isn't it amazing and somewhat miraculous that we have survived and even occasionally flourished in the midst of all this uncertainty? We are still here. Still trying. Still putting paint on the canvas. Still trying to make these miraculous human connections. Accompanied (at least occasionally) by the most wonderful music.

Even if we don't understand very much, even in the midst of pain, we can still chose to love.

In the midst of violence, we can still turn in the direction of peace.

And as our world falls down, we can rise.

For this possibility, it is worth risking everything. It is worth betting the farm.