

**“Gamble everything for life, if you are a true human being”
(Rumi, 12th Century poet)**

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church on March 13, 2016 by Catherine Somerville, with help from Maureen Oldham and Sandra Simpson.

The title of this sermon invokes the notion of gambling. It is not something you might expect to hear in a United Church of all places, where we are even a bit convoluted about the whole idea of bingo. Don’t even get us started on lottery tickets. The word is part of a larger quotation offered by a 12th century mystic poet named Rumi. He challenged his audience to gamble everything because of what we share in common as part of the network of humanity. “Gamble everything for life, if you are a true human being.”

Both of our readings today build on that notion, for we are being invited to be a risk taking people. First in Paul’s letter to the Philippians, we are invited to know Christ so deep in our bones that in faith, we will step out into places we never thought we would, and when we take on such risky behaviour, we find life. Gamble everything if you are a true human being.

He also offers the wisdom that if we stay only in the places we know well, doing the things we know to be safe and predictable, we will never need to live by faith. Paul says it this way, “I forget what lies behind, but I strain forward to what lies ahead. I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”

We know for the most part, that we can rely on ourselves. Each of us has learned how to make our way in the world. But if we are willing to venture into what we don’t know, try on different ways of being, for example, if we risk relationship, then we will discover Christ. Trusting in the grace of God to carry us, we let go of everything we gained in the past. You can’t hang your hat on past glories, Paul is saying. Trusting is the path of faithfulness, for when we believe enough to trust, then we discover our story to be part of God’s larger story of faithfulness. Paul is inviting us to step into newness, and we will discover that we are not alone, for with God, we are part of a journey that changes lives.

The other reading is the lovely recounting of the story of Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus, and it tells of a time when she risked something herself for love’s sake. Jesus came for dinner, and when he walked through her door, she knew that this moment called for something much, much bigger than words. She went to her sleeping place, opened up her trunk which contained her most personal and valuable items. She returned to Jesus, and proceeded to pour out the perfume on him, as a sign of blessing.

She knew what others would say, people like Judas, the ones with the stingy hearts who would criticize and put her down. None of their scorn mattered in the least. She risked sharing her love, even knowing that others might not understand.

Most of you will know that we here at St. Andrew's have welcomed a family of refugees from Syria. When we watch the news, and listen to reports from the camps in Lebanon, when we hear of the horrors facing those whose only alternative is to flee their homes with the clothes on their backs, we know that they have risked everything for life. But what I am starting to realize, especially with those readings in mind, is that we as a community are also being called into some risk taking behaviour as well. Even for us who have not moved to a new land, we who speak the language, know how things work here, have a life and friends and roots, this journey is an invitation for us to step into places we never thought we would go.

Let me tell you my story with our Syrian family. I was as excited as all of you when the church took this leap of faith for sponsorship. And I remember the day the Qarqouz family arrived in Sudbury. I watched the news and I cried when I saw them get off that plane. Like you, I had made some personal donations, and I figured that's about what the extent of my involvement would be. But the day that family came to church back in January, and Joanne Ross told them through the translation of Maja Dabliz that we were making a promise to be there for them as supporters, helpers, guides, and we were making a promise in our church, before God, that we would help them find their way. My heart was so moved that day, and I knew I had to do something more than donate a few household items, and give a bit of cash.

I struggled to find the place where I might help. I offered but things didn't come together. Then one day, I realized that I am really good at visiting people, so I started going to visit the family. It was quite awkward at first. I speak about six words of Arabic. They are speaking more and more English every day, but the first time I went, I had no clue what was happening.

I kept going, and last week, the family invited three of us for supper. It was a Tuesday night, and we were told to arrive at 3:30, because this family eats their evening meal as soon as the boys come home from school. I need you know that I was really nervous. I confessed my anxiety to my beloved, as I was getting ready. I didn't know what I would be eating, if I would like the food, or worse, what if I couldn't eat it? I didn't know how I was supposed to behave, if there were any particular rituals that I as an outsider would not understand. I was nervous because I speak six words of Arabic, and I had no idea how we were going to get through a meal.

The gift I was given that day was a lesson from God about hospitality.

Sawsan, the mother, opened the door, and with a beautiful smile on her face, she said, "Welcome, welcome," and invited me in. She doesn't speak much English yet, but she can say, "Welcome, welcome." She led me to the best seat in the house, put a cushion behind my back, and told me again, that I was welcome, welcome.

The three boys were in the corner, watching a bit of television. They smiled and welcomed me. They thanked me for a gift of hot chocolate I brought, because these boys love Tim Horton's hot chocolate. We talked, a bit of English, a lot of hand gesturing. Grandfather was sitting on the couch. I bowed to him, and put my hand on my heart- a symbol of greeting. He welcomed me with a smile and a bow.

The other two guests arrived. Hussein started to carry in the food. It was a casserole of sliced potatoes and chicken on top. A green salad. Two different pastries. We gathered around the table. Our plates were filled with so much good food. Then, they showed us how to eat using our hands. You break off a piece of pita bread and wrap it around a slice of the potato. You hold the chicken in your fingers.

We couldn't tell the family, "This food is so delicious", so we kept saying "Yummmm." It turned into a joke. Hussein would call out someone's name, "Catherine..." Then he would pop a bit of food in his mouth and say, "Yum." They were having good fun with us.

The littlest boy, Nabil was sitting next to me. There were knives and forks on the table, and I had taken them, and at first, I was using them to cut my chicken, like a good English person does. I glanced over and Nabil was imitating me, but he had the biggest grin on his face. Again, we laughed and laughed. It was a night of pure joy. I realized that, had I not risked accepting the invitation, I would not have had this incredible experience. I stepped into a place I had never been before, with some anxiety and fear, but I found life.

There are many people in our church, and well beyond this congregation, who are helping this family. It truly is taking a village to make this dream real. People are giving their time, driving, helping with doctor's appointments, teaching English, assisting with shopping, and showing this family what life in Canada, in the middle of winter, is all about.

There are so many people who have stepped up. I want you to hear two more stories. I have asked Maureen and Sandra to share their experiences with you.

(Maureen and Sandra share stories of taking the family to appointments and teaching them English).

Are you starting to see what I am seeing? That this is a journey we are all on, and that our very act of welcoming this family is changing not just them, but it is changing us profoundly, as individuals, and it is changing our church and our city. We are learning about things like hospitality, and commitment, and determination and perseverance, finding home. What communities like ours across this country are doing is in many ways, so very risky, but we gambled because we saw a picture of a little boy, who had drowned and whose body was washed up on a beach. We who have so much, realized that God was calling us to something bigger than any of us alone could possibly dream or make happen. We are being called to work together. And it is by faith that we are doing these incredible things. Faith and trust.

We are daring to risk the not knowing, and risk making mistakes, sometimes we will try and succeed, and other times, we will try and fail, and all along the way, we are learning that this is the wisdom of God.

If we don't take risks, we never need to learn about trusting. We only have to rely on ourselves. But if we venture into what God is doing to bring new life into places of death, we will start to realize that we are being invited to change the world.

Where God is concerned, there is no need to fear. Where God is concerned, there is promise and blessing and life, gifts that come in abundance from our generous, life giving God. Gamble everything and find your life.

Sources used:

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