

“Risk-Taking Models”

Presentation for Sisters and Associates Day 2012

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She was an elderly woman in Henderson, Ky who was looking for a renter to live in her upstairs apartment. I was a 30 something young Sister who was not able to live in the parish convent because of an allergic reaction to the mold in the house.

The match seemed perfect. Within a few minutes of agreeing to take me as a renter, she said, “I’m all alone. My husband and son were killed instantly years ago when a tree fell on our car. When I buried them I decided that I would never let myself love again because I could not stand the pain of burying another person. I know that means that I will be alone when I die.”

When I heard those words, I knew that a special journey was about to begin. Something in me said, “Where are we going, God? Why am I here?”

I got the answer just a few months later when I showed up just in time to prevent a house fire and then a few days later when I called an ambulance for Mrs. McClure because her Parkinson’s had made her totally immobile. I visited her in the hospital and was an important part of her life until the day she died. I know it was not by accident that I was with her in her final days.

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Life is full of risks....some we choose and some are thrust upon us. Of course, there are the risks that come as part of everyday life, like choosing a school or a job, choosing a life-partner, choosing an exercise routine, and choosing friends. We try to minimize the risk by making good choices, but we really don’t know if our choices are correct until years later.

Then there are risks that are thrust upon us....risks that seem to come out of nowhere....risks that arise because of the circumstances of life.

- What should I do about certain health issue?
- Who can help me with my uncooperative son?
- Should I remain committed to the Church during these turbulent times?
- Do I dare reveal my real self to this new friend?

Time and again we are faced with significant unexpected dilemmas and with every decision there is a certain amount of risk.

Today we are talking about another kind of a risk...a spiritual risk. That is, a risk undertaken because it seems that that is what God is asking of us.....a risk that is taken voluntarily...one that ultimately affects our relationship with God and with the world. It was that kind of risk taken by Angela Merici when she began her Company....It was that kind of risk that was taken by the five Louisville Ursulines who came by flatboat to Western Kentucky....and it was openness to that kind of risk that enabled the MSJ Ursulines to become an independent community in 1912.

For the next few minutes we will be thinking about these questions:

Why would anyone take a spiritual risk?

What enables or empowers a person to take a spiritual risk?

What role does certainty play in spiritual risk-taking?

What stands in the way of spiritual risk-taking?

It was mid 2007....we had opened our transitional house for homeless families, the Dorothy Day House, in May of 2006. Now we were in the midst of crisis. One of our families had moved out of the DDHH several months earlier and we had become aware of the fact that the mother had returned to her life of drug addiction. On this particular day she was high on drugs, and she was alone in her new home with her two small children, and they were in grave danger. Judy Gray and I went to the house and each of us carried one of the children outside and stood in the front yard, waiting for the Department of Child Services to come and take the children into custody.

We felt painfully obvious in this low-income black neighborhood, as all the neighbors watched from behind closed doors. When the mother walked out her front door, she had a hand behind her back...and we knew from previous experience with her that she always kept a gun in the house. Something in me

said, "Where are we going, God? How did I get here? What are you asking of me?"

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So, what does Scripture say about spiritual risk-taking?

Bible scholars use a passage from Matthew 25: 14-30 to address this topic:

14 "It will be as when a man who was going on a journey ⁷ called in his servants and entrusted His possessions to them.

15 To one he gave five talents; ⁸ to another, two; to a third, one--to each according to his ability. Then he went away. Immediately

16 the one who received five talents went and traded with them, and made another five.

17 Likewise, the one who received two made another two.

18 ⁹ But the man who received one went off and dug a hole in the ground and buried his master's money.

19 After a long time the master of those servants came back and settled accounts with them.

20 The one who had received five talents came forward bringing the additional five. ¹⁰ He said, 'Master, you gave me five talents. See, I have made five more.'

21 His master said to him, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant. Since you were faithful in small matters, I will give you great responsibilities. Come, share your master's joy.'

22 (Then) the one who had received two talents also came forward and said, 'Master, you gave me two talents. See, I have made two more.'

23 His master said to him, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant. Since you were faithful in small matters, I will give you great responsibilities. Come, share your master's joy.'

24 Then the one who had received the one talent came forward and said, 'Master, I knew you were a demanding person, harvesting where you did not plant and gathering where you did not scatter;

25 so out of fear I went off and buried your talent in the ground. Here it is back.'

26 His master said to him in reply, 'You wicked, lazy servant! ¹¹ So you knew that I harvest where I did not plant and gather where I did not scatter?

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Should you not then have put my money in the bank so that I could have got it back with interest on my return?

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Now then! Take the talent from him and give it to the one with ten.

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For to everyone who has, more will be given and he will grow rich; but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.

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And throw this useless servant into the darkness outside, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.'

Obviously, the master wanted to maximize his returns by giving the most resources to the most capable servants. The one-talent servant didn't do anything dishonest or unethical. He wasn't a bad person. The problem was that he didn't do anything at all.

We can all be "safe" Christians like that servant...going to Church every Sunday, practicing the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, tithing, measuring ourselves against the ten commandments. Like the one talent servant, we can be honest and trustworthy, unaware of the call to take spiritual risks.

But why didn't he do anything with that one talent?...probably because of fear....fear of his master, fear of failure, fear of action, fear of risk. Like that one talent servant ...we hesitate to take spiritual risks because of fear:

- Fear that others will not understand why we are taking such a risk
- Fear that we will anger the cautious people around us
- Fear that we will make the traditionalists shake their heads
- Fear that we will upset the people who need certainty in their lives
- Fear of failure

Fear tricks us into living "safe Christianity"it lulls us into wanting a smooth ride in our faith life. It steers us away from the uncertainty that accompanies risk, it beckons us away from the adventure of a life lived deeply in Christ.

The call came out of nowhere. The voice on the other end said, “Sr. Maureen can I give you an apartment? I just renovated it and it seems that God keeps telling me to give it to you. You can do whatever you want with it.” That was about four years ago and we used that apartment to house a disabled woman and her three teenage daughters for a year and a half...free of charge. Another call like that came just this past week. The man said, “I have six houses I would like to give you. Can I show them to you next Thursday?” As we drove around Memphis looking at those six houses, again my heart was saying, “God, how did I get here. Where are we going?”

The most oft repeated phrase in Scripture is “Do not fear.” We read it over 200 times. From the safe distance of history, we tend to think that Angela had a real certitude about what she was doing. We think those pioneer Ursulines were brave women who ventured forth on that flatboat with determination and bravery. We forget that Angela must have had fear, those five Ursulines must have had fear..... and we know that we have fear.....yet we must move forward trusting that God will be with us in our fear.

So, why would anyone take a spiritual risk.... A risk that is not practically necessary, but one that we feel called to by God? It might be a risk to make a special commitment, a risk to love another without expecting return, a risk to go outside our comfort zone, a risk to be unusually generous with our time, our attention, our skills and abilities?

First of all, like Angela and other model risk-takers, we begin by returning to a few of our basic beliefs...

- God loves us more than we can imagine;
- God wants only what is good for us;
- God wants others to know His love through us.

This is the God who, from time to time, invites us to risk, not just for the sake of risk-taking, but for the sake of furthering God’s kingdom on earth and for the sake of our own growth in our relationship with God and the people God has placed in our lives.

When our life with God brings us face to face with risk, do we believe that it is God who is inviting us to risk? Or do we talk ourselves out of, or “steer clear” of a path that leads to risk?

Spiritual risk-taking has nothing to do with self-promotion. It has to do with openness to being used by God for God’s purposes. It has to do with trust that God wants us to advance his kingdom and wants others to know His love through us.

We’ve all sung that song: “Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me, Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. Melt me, mold me, fill me, **use me**. Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.”

It’s not always easy to believe that God wants to use us in a special way....most of us think we are unworthy or not holy enough....we think we don’t have time in our busy lives....we think it must just be our own ego that has big plans. And so, the first step in spiritual risk-tasking is trust....trust that God **could** use us....and trust that God wants to use us....and trust that God will provide the grace and guidance we need along the way.

Secondly, spiritual risk-taking rests on our ongoing relationship with God. Not a relationship that is made up of occasional prayer...but a relationship in which God is the center of all we are and do. When we spend time nurturing that relationship, we are more likely to recognize when God is calling us to a new risk. We recognize that God wants to use us for His purposes.



He was a young man who felt unwanted by the Church. I was his choir director and recognized that he needed to experience God's embrace of love and the acceptance of other Catholics. Although it seemed like very unfamiliar territory to me, I began to read about homosexuality and the Church. I found myself asking:

"How did I get here, God? Where are we going?"

We gathered a few friends, including some MSJ Associates, and began meeting monthly to talk about the Church and homosexuality. Those small seeds resulted in the formation of the Diocesan Ministry with Gay & Lesbian Persons in the Diocese of Memphis....a ministry that is now flourishing under new leadership, one that brings together over 50 gay/lesbian Catholics, friends and family for fellowship and spiritual growth at least once each month.

Being willing to take a spiritual risk means that you are willing to sacrifice your own agenda in order to be used for God's agenda. That always feels risky....because all of us want to have control over our own lives....all of us want to plan ahead...to look into the future with a certain level of security.

Think about Angela....did she really know that God was going to use her to begin a Company? Did she give up her own agenda to take the risk God asked of her? What a huge risk she took in a day when women had few rights.

And what about Mere Marie, called from France to the New World...faced with illiterate Indians who weren't necessarily interested in what she had to share with them....did she give up her agenda, to do what God needed and wanted her to do?

And what about those 5 Ursulines on the flatboat.....their expectations certainly weren't met when they disembarked and found that there was no school waiting for them in Western Kentucky. They could have turned back, but they didn't...they adjusted their agenda to fit God's....they took a spiritual risk... What a risk to their safety ...imagine how their lives were turned upside down to minister in this place?

And the Sisters who sought independence in 1912....What a risk to no longer have the security of an established community of Sisters. What a step into the unknown.....

Yes, we have a long list of models.....but now the question is “how do we prepare ourselves to take spiritual risks?” Besides listening to God, perhaps the best preparation is habitually saying “yes” to God rather than debating or compromising. In that way, little by little, we become more aware of God’s ways.....more open to His movement in our lives.

And we must keep our eyes off ourselves...off the rewards or the consequences that might come our way. Spiritual risk-taking has nothing to do with success or failure...it has to do with faithfulness.....faithfulness to God no matter where he leads us, not matter what happens.

I can still remember the shock I felt when I turned the corner. I was on my way to take food, household and personal items to a homeless family who had found temporary shelter in a trailer park. By the address that I had been given, I knew that it was likely to be a poor neighborhood. But that expectation did not prevent the shock that came over me when I got there. It looked like the Third World....and the trailer they planned to live in looked like it had been discarded by someone else as junk. The room for the 2 teenage girls was about 8 feet long and 6 feet wide....the husband and wife had a bedroom that was about 8 feet long and 10 feet wide. No furniture, no air-conditioning, no lights...only walls with holes and ceilings with water stains. Something in me said, “How did I get here? Where are we going, God? What are you asking of me?”

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Despite the fear and hesitation we might have about spiritual risk, it is clear that if we are willing to take the risk God presents to us, if we are willing to stretch beyond what we think are our limits in order to reach for a goal, we will be drawn into a deeper, richer relationship with God.

This morning I have shared some stories from my own journey with God. As I reflected on those stories, it became clear to me that what we call “spiritual” risk-taking begins in very simple, everyday circumstances: renting a room in someone’s house... a desire for children to be safe... compassion for the pain of another...

What we call “spiritual” risk-taking actually **grows out of our loving response to everyday living**. When we strive to live our lives in openness to God – to God’s love for us and to God’s action in our lives – the line between what is spiritual and what is not spiritual disappears. Those risks that are part of everyday life -- like choosing a school or a job, choosing a life-partner, and choosing friends – those risks become part of our everyday life **with God**... until eventually, every decision, every choice, every risk is considered with openness to what God is doing... and where God is leading... and how this particular decision will affect my life with God and God’s love for others.

As we reflect on models of risk-taking, we need to remember that Jesus himself took risks. We know that he was fully human and fully divine but he must have experienced the uncertainty that accompanies risk...

- Was He certain that the words, “Lazarus, come forth” would result in new life being breathed into his dear friend?
- When Jesus healed the woman with the hemorrhage and when he told the lame to rise up and walk, was he confident in the results he would see?

Or was Jesus risking his knowledge of God’s will in each situation? Was Jesus risking what God was asking him to do... to be? Was Jesus risking who he believed he was when he said, “I and the Father are one”?

What did Jesus risk when he publicly forgave the woman caught in adultery? What did he risk when he said, “Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God”?

Jesus’ life was a life of risk. And in order for us to consider risk-taking today, we have to ask, “What was the driving force that led Jesus to risk?”

It is clear that the driving force that led Jesus to risk – even to the point of giving his very life – was love – love for the Father and love for us.

What was the driving force that led Angela? Her own love for God which resulted in deep love for the people in her life and her desire that women would be free to know God's love for them and live that love freely.

Mere Marie's love for God and her desire to allow God to love others through her was the driving force that led her to travel to the New World and work night and day to care for and teach the Indians she served.

Love for God and a desire to share God's love through teaching was the driving force that kept five pioneer Ursulines in Maple Mount, Kentucky, in spite of disappointment and hardship.

And now, in 2012, we are invited anew to reflect on our relationship with God and with each other... and to pray for openness to the Spirit so we don't miss where God asks us to risk for the sake of Love -- both personally and communally...

During this year, we are celebrating 100 years of Mt. St. Joseph Ursuline life and we are musing on what the future might hold. Like Angela, like Mere Marie, like the 5 pioneer Ursulines, like the Sisters who were part of the Ursuline community in 1912, like Jesus, we're challenged to open ourselves to new possibilities in order to respond to God's work in the world today.

As I close today, I want to share a quote with you that seems to summarize a lot of what we have been reflecting on: "The sign of God is that we are led where we did not mean to go."

"THE SIGN OF GOD IS THAT WE ARE LED WHERE WE DID NOT MEAN TO GO."

Over the years, I have found myself, time and again, in places that I did not mean to go...but every time I have discovered that God's agenda is always better than mine....and spiritual risk-taking has always led me to a deeper, richer relationship with God. Fear is inevitable....but trust in God makes spiritual risk-taking possible.

The blue band on my arm is my Family ID to get into Le Bonheur Children's Hospital in Memphis where a ten year old girl who suffered heart failure is in the Cardiovascular ICU....but that's another story....and I continue to ask, "God, how did I get here? Where are we going?"

Thank you!

For Reflection...

Can you recall a time when you made a decision that involved risk-taking?

How was God present to you as you made that decision?

Describe how taking this risk affected your relationship with God and/or with others.

Did today's talk on risk-taking inspire any new insights that will be helpful in your own journey with God?