

The Risks of Living in a Risk Adverse Society
“Come Down From Your Trees”

by Rev. Linda Yates, November 4, 2007
St. John’s United Church

Luke 19:1-10

When I reflect on my time in Guatemala, I think that my biggest learnings have been around “risk.” These learnings actually began with a conversation Maria Jose and I had around the signing of waivers months before we even left. The Breaking The Silence Network (BTS) always got their participants to sign waivers which stated that the Tatamagouche Centre and/or trip leaders would not be sued should anyone become injured or worse. We adapted their waiver to suit the needs of St. Johns United Church, that is, you folks. Maria Jose was surprised. As we talked it through, she explained to me that in Guatemala, because risk and death is something that people live with on a daily basis, the idea of suing church leaders, volunteer or staff, just would not enter the minds of Guatemalans. She said they would just be glad someone had come forward to give their time, energy and willingness to take on their own risks in carrying out such a trip. It left me wondering. I realized I considered lawsuits normative. I would not have even held it against parents if they sued us or sued me. So how did this happen? How and when did this assumption, typical in North American society, become normative?

We are becoming an almost totally risk adverse culture. There is much talk these days about “bubble wrapped kids.” Parents protect children from any sort of adverse consequence and therefore do not allow them to take risks of even minor kinds. I listened with sadness last week as some mothers were interviewed on CBC Radio offering their opinions on this issue. One of them said she began to realize the magnitude of the problem after she and her friends had talked about a child abducted from a playground in the United States. Apparently the mother of the abducted child claimed she just bent down for a second to pick up something off of the ground and her child disappeared. The mother on the radio said she began to be afraid to bend over to pick something up. Our children and teens are being raised with intense fear and worry as the normative travel mode in any out-of-the-house excursions. All of us live within an increasingly fearful culture. It is encouraged by our governments, our media and by advertisers who seek to sell us stuff to sooth our insecurities. In response we are becoming risk adverse. Risk adversity is detrimental to economic innovation. It can definitely be connected to the demise of mainstream churches as we sit in our pews wringing our hands fearful of making big change. Risk adversity can be most worryingly tied to the continued erosion of our civil rights which we seem so willing to hand over to the state, small piece by small piece, all so that we can be free from the “risk” of terrorism.

When we were in Guatemala we learned of many people who practised principle based risk taking. There was a priest in Santiago Atitlan, referred to in Guatemala as their “American martyr,” Father Stan Rother. His risk taking really came in conjunction with some amazing risk taking by the Roman Catholic Church during the sweeping changes recommended by Vatican II of 1962-1965. Vatican II decreed masses would be said in the vernacular, the language of the

people, instead of Latin. In Guatemala they began celebrating Mass in Spanish. The bible also was to be read in the language of the people. Not only that, they would *teach each other* to read and interpret it. The result was liberation theology. This was a big surprise. That is what happens when you take risks, surprising things occur. It turns out that when people began reading the bible for themselves they discovered that God is on the side of the poor. God is not on the side of repressive authority. This then created problems for those in authority in Central America- whether that authority was held within government, the army or the church. This did not stop Father Rother, however. Despite the death threats he continued to encourage the people he served as priest to live out their scripture-based learnings through the creation of co-operatives, schools and organizations that supported democratic reforms. He was murdered in 1962.

Another risk taker we actually met in the flesh was Jesus Tecu. A gentleman who saw his family murdered in Rabbinal when he was a young boy, he was taken captive and enslaved for several years before his sister found him. A documentary was made about him (*Rainmakers*, Series Two by Bullfrog films) about his relentless, tenacious search to bring those who participated in the massacres at Rabbinal to justice. We were blessed to be given a guided tour by him of the Rabbinal cemetery where so many of the massacre victims are buried, including his parents, sisters and brothers. He continues to call to account those who raped, injured and murdered during the genocide of the 1980's. For this Jesus Tecu must keep his family constantly on the move, for they are always being threatened. When asked why he puts his family at risk he replies that his children have taught him about joy again and it is *for* them and a future of freedom that he takes such risks.

You have heard Rod talk about the dangerous street traffic. It was across one of those streets that Maria Jose dragged me across frantically calling and waving to one of her friends that she had not seen for many years who just happened to be there. Maria Jose's friend was running in the elections which were just two weeks away when we were in Guatemala. It is a risky thing to run in a Guatemalan election. Some of this woman's running mates had already been murdered. Guatemalan people themselves took many risks just to get to polling booths during elections. These people take democracy seriously. In our own country we are lucky if people can risk taking thirty minutes out of their busy work schedule to vote. Our own government this week announced significant tax cuts and the extent of our political participation is the shrugging we do as we say "Oh well, as long as I get my \$600.00 per year that is all I care about. No matter that day care spaces, international development and all manner of social programs have to be cut or postponed to do it, as long as other those other people, vulnerable people, assume the risk."

The kingdom of God will never come in its fullness without some risk taking - on our part and also on God's part. It is always amazing to me how the coming of this Kingdom seems to depend on us risking radical hospitality with one another. In our Scripture story today we meet Zachheus, the tax collector. In those days tax collecting was a privatized kind of contracted out affair. The Roman government had a certain amount of taxes they wanted collected from neighbourhoods and whatever the collector obtained above and beyond that was theirs to keep. The Roman State did not care how it was obtained turning a blind eye to methods of intimidation, harassment and violence. In carrying out their work Jewish tax collectors came into contact with all manner of people: gentiles, prostitutes and the like. For these reasons tax collectors were considered to be ritually unclean as well as unscrupulous. Zaccheus took a risk coming into that

crowd which would have included many of his “clients” to get a glimpse of this man Jesus. Being a short man desperate to see Jesus, he took another risk and climbed a sycamore tree for a better view.

Jesus is surrounded by crowds who may or may not be friendly toward him. He is on his way to Jerusalem, walking through Jericho which was a crossroads of sort. Jerusalem, as we know will be the place where Jesus’ life ultimately ends. He takes risks, this Jesus and not just that huge life ending one we know as crucifixion. In fact, Jesus’ life was threatened some eight times throughout his life. In our reading today Jesus does some principle-based risk taking. He turns to Zaccheus and says “Hey, come down from there I am eating at your house today.” The crowd and the Pharisees certainly did not think much of Jesus after that. What was he thinking eating with that sinner?

Jesus has seen something in Zaccheus. Does he see potential? Does he see the capacity for relationship change with God and with his fellow man? Jesus took a risk on him - even though it costs Jesus much public good will and much in the esteem of the religious authorities. It may have even made it dangerous for him as his reputation as a radical becomes reinforced. Zaccheus *sees* that Jesus has seen this potential for good in him and is therefore transformed by that belief. Zaccheus then takes another even bigger risk. He decides to give half of what he has to the poor and pay back four times what he has cheated people. The religious code within the bible requires only 20% be paid back. In our supper time bible study this week which that day consisted of all women except for Wendell, we were astonished to think about what that would have meant for Zaccheus’s family. His wife and children had no doubt become quite accustomed to a life of luxury. Their lives will now be radically changed as a result of his change of heart. Perhaps even household slaves that had been with them all of their lives with them might have to be sold. Talk about turning everything upside down.

Taking principle-basked risks in the Lord and making things right is gonna hurt. Today’s story is about what happens when we take these kinds of risks in the Lord. Carl will tell you that many a night before we left for Guatemala I lay awake at night overcome with the responsibility and trust you had laid upon us. After all you gave us charge of the most precious persons in your lives, your young people. What a risk you took in us, signed waivers or not. Guatemala is a dangerous country. What if something had happened? There would have been grief, pain and scandal. The youth and young adults took a risk. They sacrificed much time, energy and money to go to a place that would change them forever. They have seen another reality, had their consciousness changed and cannot go back to being whom they were before. They are much stronger, spiritually oriented people. However, they now spiritually and mentally live in a different world than their friends and it can be painful and disconcerting negotiating between those worlds. They risked never being the same and I am so proud of them as I know you are. Transformation, even good transformation is painful and always involves risk.

People in Guatemala took risks. I am grateful for the risks taken on by those Guatemalan folks who took us in with such generous hospitality. They unquestioningly shared their homes and their limited food. We Canadians are from that part of the world that is contributing to oppression and to environmental degradation through our mining industries and our international development policy. We will hear more about this on December 9th when Javier, leader of a group raising awareness about the effects of mining on Guatemalan indigenous peoples comes to

visit with us at St. John's. Javier, too, is a man who risks much to do this work. Despite our complicity as a nation, the Guatemalans opened their homes and most importantly their hearts and their stories to us. They risk because they believe in the power of relationship building; slow meaningful relationship building which includes acknowledgement that people make mistakes and deserve forgiveness from time to time. They believe in the power of transformation and they believe in the power of Jesus Christ *because they have read the bible for themselves*.

What I have also learned in Guatemala is that we lie to ourselves about risk. We pretend we can rectify economic injustice without pain and suffering on our part. We pretend we can rectify the damage we have done to our ailing planetary home without pain and suffering on our part. We pretend that we can enjoy democratic freedom without expressing our political will and exercising our political power. We lie to ourselves because we don't want to risk our comfort. We don't want to risk conflict with others. We don't want to risk listening to others in the process of dialogue and perhaps be changed by the exchange. So, we comfort ourselves with these lies as we spend our lives swimming in a culture of risk adversity.

But I have hope. What I have learned from Guatemala is that Jesus calls us to risk - not foolishly like driving drunk or spending our money on lottery tickets. He calls us to take risks that build up; to take risks that challenge unjust power and begin new relationships. This is principle-based risk taking. The most important thing I learned in Guatemala is that *we* are people who can take principle-based risks; *You* are people who can take risks; *the church* is a community that can take principle-based risks. Our young are people that can take principle-based risks and are challenging us to do so too, particularly in the name of saving this planetary home we all share. That is a very, very hopeful sign for the future.

What principle-based risk is God challenging you to take in your own lives? Stop watching and waiting. Learn to see the strengths that God knows is inside you and then just wait to see what happens when you accept it. Go on, take a risk. Come on down from your trees.