

this little church. We graduated together, and Archie was ordained and installed as Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Central City a year and a half ago.

It is easy to play it safe, to continue to do church business as usual. It is easy to maintain what we are doing now. But what kind of ministry could we be doing if we took a few more risks? We've printed the quote from the Book of Order in the bulletin. I'd like to ask that you take it home, read through it a few more times, and pray about ways that God might be calling this church in new avenues of ministry. How can we fulfill our call? What risks are we being called to take, trusting in God alone as the author and giver of life? Are we ready for some risky business?

certified, his company relocated his position. He could either move to Western Kentucky or lose his job. He chose to move his family to Western Kentucky.

Soon after, he was commissioned by that Presbytery to serve as a Commissioned Lay Pastor, and called to serve First Presbyterian Church in Central City.

Attendance went from an average of 17 on a Sunday to 45. He was then offered and accepted a second call to a small church with 10 members in Drakesboro. As

Archie juggled the two churches and his full time job, he began to sense a call to

become ordained, which would require him to get his Master of Divinity. He knew

he couldn't pursue his MDiv and continue to work full time while serving both

churches. Then one day the session at the church in Drakesboro called a special

meeting, and at this meeting, the treasurer opened the church checkbook. The

Session voted unanimously to cover Archie's tuition, and she wrote him a check

for the balance in the church account. The church voted to close their doors and

merge with the Central City church. When the Central City church heard about

this, their Session voted to underwrite the rest of his costs so that Archie could quit

his job and enter Seminary full time. Archie continued to serve at the Central City

church throughout Seminary, commuting back and forth from Louisville on the

weekends. I remember talking with Archie about a new program they were

starting, to provide sandwiches and school supplies and other things to reach out to

the poorest children in the area. He was awed by how God was working through

resources for ministry in this world. But where are we being called to minister now? What are the current needs of the world around us?

It is easy for us to play it safe and maintain the ministry that we are doing. There are many other churches at a crossroads, that must decide whether to take real risks or simply maintain what they have for as long as they can, until they eventually have to close their doors. One church in Louisville faced this decision a few years ago. Faced with dwindling membership, less income, and an old, non-accessible building, the church decided that, rather than trying to maintain what they had, they would take a risk. The congregation voted to sell their building and move across the street to worship at Westminster Terrace, an independent living home of Presbyterian Homes and Services. In their new home, their ministry has expanded to integrate with the programs of the facility, and has continued to reach out to the growing Hispanic population in their neighborhood, offering bilingual worship services and simultaneous translation to a family of recent Cuban immigrants. When their building sold, the congregation voted to tithe 10% of the proceeds to be directed to a mission initiative of the Presbytery of Mid-Kentucky, reaching out to the growing Hispanic and Latino population in the Presbytery. Had they not taken the risks, they never could have had such a continuing impact.

They aren't the only risk-takers. I had a friend who was an elder and became a Commissioned Lay Pastor in this Presbytery. Soon after he was

servants, each of whom was given a sum of money. The first two invested the money and doubled it, but the third decided to play it safe. After all, investing is risky business! We know that parable doesn't judge him well. He failed to use his talents. Are there ways that we fail to use what God has given us? Are we using our time, or the gifts and talents that God has given us to be the evangelists that we are called to be? Many churches would be overjoyed to have even the physical resources that we have – this building, with so much space, right downtown. How can we use the time, talents, and resources that we have been given to take some risks and spread our ministry?

There is another story of an almost-risk taker. Remember the story of Peter, walking on the water? He was doing just fine until he looked down, and then he started sinking. Looking around, he began to doubt God's power to keep him afloat, and so he started to sink. In what ways do we fail to believe that God can accomplish anything? Are our doubts holding back the ministries of this church?

Then there was a story we heard a few weeks ago. It was about a rich young ruler who asked Jesus what he had to do in order to have eternal life. Jesus told him to sell all of his possessions and give the money to the poor. That was a risk the young man couldn't take. He heard God's call, but he failed to answer. Our church has a great history of answering God's call to minister to this community. Members of this church have been faithful in giving their time, talents, and

constitution: “The Church is called to be Christ’s faithful evangelist..., making disciples..., baptizing them..., teaching them...; demonstrating by love...; sharing in worship, fellowship, and nurture, practicing a deepened life of prayer and service...; participating in God’s activity in the world ... by healing and reconciling and binding up wounds, ministering to the needs of the poor, the sick, the lonely, and the powerless, engaging in the struggle to free people from sin, fear, oppression, hunger, and injustice, giving itself and its substance to the service of those who suffer, sharing with Christ in the establishing of his just, peaceable, and loving rule in the world.”¹

Those are risky activities, and they require us as a church to put all we have on the line. Lest we fail to understand the gravity of the charge above, the *Book of Order* continues by making it clear: “The Church is called to undertake this mission even at the risk of losing its life, trusting in God alone as the author and giver of life, sharing the gospel, and doing those deeds in the world that point beyond themselves to the new reality in Christ.”² Are we a risk-taking church? Or do we find it easier to play it safe?

There are memorable stories of risk-takers in the Bible, and we also have stories of those who played it safe. For example, there is the parable of the 3

¹ Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (USA) *Book of Order 2009-2011*, Louisville, KY, G-3.0300c.

² *Ibid*, G-3.0400.

The next morning Boaz does take care of things, goes through the proper legal channels, and finally takes Ruth as his wife. The rest, as they say, is history. Ruth and Boaz have a son, Obed. Obed later has a son named Jesse, and Jesse goes on to have a number of sons, the youngest of whom, David, becomes the great King of Israel, from whose line Jesus is born a thousand years later. If not for the risks that Ruth and others took, where would we be today?

Looking at our stories today can be inspiring, but it is also easy to set them as examples on a pedestal – far from our reach and any expectations for our daily lives. We live in a different world, and we have to find a balance between risk and security. In ways we probably don't even realize, we make decisions every day based on an analysis of how much risk we are willing to take. We evaluate the risks and often go for what we think is the safest option.

The gospel is not a gospel of playing it safe, however. Time after time, Jesus calls people to great risk, to give up everything to follow him. And he leads by example. Our story from Mark today is a turning point in that gospel. From this point on, the focus shifts to Jesus' upcoming persecution, trial, and crucifixion. Just like the widow who gave all she had, Jesus gives all that he has – his very life – and holds nothing back.

As Christ's body on earth, we, the church, are also called to great risk, to give all that we have, and to hold nothing back. According to our church

Jerusalem, where the famine has ended. She urges Ruth and Orpah to do the safe thing – to return to their families. Orpah relents, but Ruth makes the risky decision to stay and care for Naomi, wherever that will lead.

It leads to Bethlehem and harvest time, and sends Ruth into the fields of Boaz to glean– to pick up what the laborers left behind. The work was difficult and often dangerous, especially for a young woman like Ruth with no company to protect her. Boaz sees Ruth and asks about her. His workers identify her. Boldly, she asks Boaz if she might continue to glean, and not only does he agree, he also provides her with food and water, and some level of protection in her work.

Ruth continues to glean in the fields through the harvest season, and Naomi starts to hatch a plan. We read part of that plan today. It requires Ruth to put everything on the line. Naomi has Ruth get all dressed up and go down to the threshing floor, which was no place for a lady to be. After Boaz falls asleep, Ruth goes to the place where he is sleeping and lays beside him. At midnight Boaz is startled awake and finds Ruth next to him. She essentially proposes that he marry her. Boaz easily could have rejected this forward presumption, cut off his support from Ruth and her mother, and then they would have been in real trouble. But instead, Boaz praises her, and calls her a woman of valor and strength. He promises to resolve the situation one way or another.

“Risky Business” – Stephanie Wing, 11.8.09

I recently saw a short video listing a number of “famous failures.” Lucille Ball was dismissed from drama school with a note saying she was too shy. A teacher told Thomas Edison he was too stupid to learn anything. Walt Disney was fired from a newspaper for lacking imagination and having no original ideas. The video ends with a voice-over that says, “If you’ve never failed, then you’ve never lived,” and the final screen reads “Life = Risk.”

In light of our stories today, I’d like to change that to “Faith = Risk.” The widow in the Temple from the gospel reading gives everything she has to the Temple treasury – all that she had to live on! Surely she would have been excused for passing the plate without putting her literal two cents in, but she didn’t. Quietly she puts into the offering all that she has to her name. From her faith and devotion, she holds nothing back.

The story of Ruth, part of which we read today, is a remarkable one, full of risky – and at times risqué – behavior. The risk-taking starts right away. Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and their two sons leave their hometown of Bethlehem to go into Moab, a land that was often in conflict with Israel. Soon after that, Elimelech dies, leaving Naomi and her sons to fend for themselves. The sons marry two Moabite women – Orpah and Ruth, but then both of the sons die, leaving three women alone and childless. Naomi decides to return home to