

Many Gifts, One Spirit: Taking a Risk with the Holy Spirit

How many of us watch game shows on TV? There is a whole network dedicated to game shows. You can see black and white versions of “What’s My Line”, “To Tell the Truth”, or even “Password.” Do you have a favorite? Take a moment and think. Now, turn and talk to someone and share your game. Would anyone like to share their favorite game with the congregation this morning?

One of my favorite game shows is and was, “Press Your Luck.” The contestant has so many spins around the board. She/he may get “fabulous prizes”, cash, or hit the unfortunate “Whammy” that takes away all of the winnings. The contestant has the opportunity to stop whenever he/she has amassed a small fortune or can keep going, also known as, “Press Your Luck” to see if you can get more. How much further should one go? How much of a risk should one take?

Risk-taking brings forth a plethora of emotions like fear, excitement, illness, slyness, happiness, sadness, and a host of others. I think it may come down to what the results are after we have taken a risk. Sometimes, we choose to just keep doing what we are doing because it is comfortable. We don’t want to be uncomfortable. Some of us just want sunset to come, put on loungewear, and settle with a good book, a game, or TV. Others want to go on an adventure, see the world, see what’s out there, etc. For some, crossing the Connecticut River and venturing on to Riverdale Street or, heaven forbid, Springfield, is a big gamble.

Other folks will travel the world, regardless of age or health issues that are before them.

Just about three years ago, this church took a risk. The Holy Spirit spoke to a search committee, and they felt moved to call someone who was very different to guide them as pastor. They weren't sure what their actions would cause or how much division would happen in the church. I'd like to think that after the initial shock, we've done "OK" with the choice to call an openly gay man who was married to another man to serve as pastor of First Congregational Church of Westfield.

I know that I have challenged this congregation with some new ways of thinking about things. Some have gone over well with everyone while others have gone over well with most, but not everyone. We have done what we can to "welcome the stranger" as we have opened our building to many different groups in the past two years. We have welcomed the Westfield Food Pantry, Young Singers, Westfield Historical Commission, various music groups from Westfield State University, Westfield Theatre Group, and the Tuesday Morning Music Club for a concert or two. We have held Halloween parties, pasta dinners, open houses, programs such as "Make a Joyful Noise" in an effort to introduce ourselves. We took a big risk in hosting the Westfield Food Pantry's Food Truck twice a week and have welcomed people into our church for a warm meal in the winter months.

Our Deacons have made sure that we visit those who are lonely or are sick in the hospitals, nursing homes, and rehabilitation facilities. Others in our church have helped families in need of shelter. Our Blessed Buys Thrift Shoppe helps to clothe the naked and provide what is needed, whether or not people have the means to pay the tag price. These are all great ways in which we follow the Gospel message, especially as put forth in today's Gospel passage from Matthew.

The Gospel also tells us that we cannot rest on our laurels. The Holy Spirit continuously challenges us to use our many gifts given to us by our Triune God to further spread the Gospel message. We are going to be asked to stretch and grow in different ways over the next few years. Some of us will be thrilled by this while others may simply want to keep things the way they always were. However, we continue to be challenged by the Holy Spirit to move from what is comfortable to what is uncomfortable. If we put our faith in God, the risks that may be asked of us over the next few years will not be insurmountable. Look at what we have done in 345 years as First Congregational Church. I hope that most of us will be around to celebrate the church's 350 anniversary in 2029. Do we believe in the power of the Holy Spirit? If a church can survive for 345-350 years, I'd like to think that the Holy Spirit has had something to do with it. Are we willing to take some risks so that we can serve the church into the second quarter of the twenty-first century?

As we consider our monetary pledge for the coming year, we must pray about how we can bring about the work of spreading the Gospel message of Jesus through the greater Westfield area in the year to come. If you have your pledge card today, drop it in the collection basket today. If you're someone, like me, who didn't bring a pledge card to church, we ask that you get it into our office as soon as possible. This allows our Budget committee to plan for the year to come. It allows all of us to plan for how we listen to the Spirit to put our many gifts to work.

Throughout the week, I encourage all of us to spend some time in prayer and reflection as to what risks we are willing to take to bring about the Gospel message from our church to the community at large. We can "press our luck" or move forward with blessings bestowed on us in many gifts from God. Amen!