

Taking Some Risks
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This week I saw an amazing story about a high school boy getting the chance to play basketball after years of being the team's manager. Jason has been taking care of the players at Greece Athena High School in Rochester, New York for years. He's a special needs student with autism, so his job has been getting the team towels and water, rebounding for them during practice, and motivating them in practices and games. Because he has been so devoted, the coach let him suit up for the last game of the season. The coach explained that he wanted Jason to feel what it's like to wear a jersey and sit on the bench with his teammates.

But with 4 minutes to go in the game, the coach pointed to #52—Jason, and Jason ran onto the floor. You could hear the crowd loudly cheering in the background; they were just so excited that he got the chance to play. So the game resumes, and Jason gets the ball and shoots. It's an air ball, as he laughed with the news reporter, it wasn't really even close. And then he shoots another time and misses again. Finally, he tries one more time, this time a three point shot and he makes it. The crowd goes wild.

So this would be a happy ending to the story, this special needs team manager gets to play in a high school boys basketball game and he scores a 3 point shot. Amazing—but it doesn't end there. Jason keeps shooting 3 pointers and he keeps making them—he makes 6 3 point shots in all and ends up scoring 20 points in those 4 minutes he got to play. With the biggest grin on his face, he told the reporter, "I was hot as a pistol!" In a picture perfect moment, he makes his last 3 point shot right as the buzzer sounds and the crowd erupts, total mayhem, as everyone, including the opposing team and fans celebrate this great victory for Jason.[1]

So what does this amazing feel-good story about Jason and his 20 point basketball game have to do with the fairly disturbing and harsh Parable of the Talents in Matthew? For me, everything. Because what the parable points to is that sometimes you have to take risks in order to reap the rewards. Now the Master in this story isn't exactly someone I would feel compelled to cheer for on the basketball court. He's a harsh man, who reaps what he doesn't sow and presumably gathers from crops that aren't even his.

The Master goes on a journey and in his absence trusts three of his slaves with some talents, which were actually pretty large sums of money. The one slave greets him on his return with 10 talents, he doubled his original amount, the other comes to him with 4, he also doubled his original amount. And then the poor, frightened slave comes to him with the 1 original talent. He was so afraid to trade with it and possibly lose the money; he was so afraid of upsetting his master, that he buried the talent and kept it safe and sound and hidden. It was a risk-free way to save what he had been given. And so the master berates him and punishes him, ordering him to be thrown into the "outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." This is Matthew's favorite expression to put you on edge thinking about the horror of the final punishment.

Considering this is how the slave was treated, no wonder he was terrified of disappointing the Master, terrified of possibly taking a risk and losing the talent entrusted to him. But that paralyzing fear held him back from taking a chance, and that's really sad when you think about it.

Think about the difference between this slave and a modern day story like Jason's. Jason would have been in the same boat, most likely, only trusted with the one talent in the first place

because maybe his master would doubt his abilities. For Jason, I think it would have lit a fire deep within him, I think he would have wanted to prove that master wrong. He would have thought, "You only trust me with 1 talent when you give my friends 5 and 2? Well, just watch and see what I can do."

You get a sense in this story that this frightened slave had very little self-esteem and confidence in his abilities, in his talents as a person. It's like Frederick Wilcox said to use a baseball analogy this time. "Progress always involves risks. You can't steal second base and keep your foot on first." If you're so timid and afraid of making mistakes, if you can't bring yourself to just go for it, and see what happens, you're going to get thrown out at second. The terrified slave doesn't even try to take that figurative 3 point shot or steal second base; he just gives up in some respects without even trying in the first place. He didn't believe in himself, he didn't have the courage to take a risk, and so he doesn't get the victory.

Now Harvey MacKay, the businessman and columnist, tells a story about risk and believing in yourself. The story is about a college professor who stood in front of his class of 30 senior molecular biology students on exam day. Before passing them the final, he said, "I have been privileged to be your instructor this semester, and I know how hard you have worked to prepare for this test. I also know most of you are off to medical school or graduate school next autumn. I am well aware of how much pressure you are under to keep your grade point averages up. Because I am confident that you know this material, I am prepared to offer an automatic B to anyone who opts to skip taking the final exam."^[2]

The sighs of relief were audible. Some of the students jumped up from their desks right away, thanking the professor for the lifeline he had just thrown them and walking out the door. "Any other takers?" he asked. "This is your last opportunity." One more student decided to leave. The professor then looked around the classroom and handed out the final exam to his students. The exam consisted of two sentences. It read: "Congratulations, you have just received an A in this class. Keep believing in yourself."^[3]

Now ask yourself honestly, would you have stayed seated in that classroom to take the test or would you have walked out the door? For me, if it was a molecular biology exam, I would have taken that B and run out the door. But if that happened to me in seminary, I would have stayed because I'm stubborn enough and determined enough to want that A and to feel deep down, that if I studied and prepared, I should have the opportunity to earn it. It would be taking a chance because you could get lower than a B, but it does point to the reality that when you take a great risk, the yield can be even greater.

Now I don't think that I've told any of you this story, but I almost didn't even apply to be the next minister of Pilgrim Church. I got an e-mail from the Massachusetts Conference recommending that I allow my Ministerial Profile to be forwarded to the Search Committee of Pilgrim Church thinking that we could be a good fit for each other. I got that e-mail when I was living in Ohio with my parents, and I went into the kitchen to talk to my mom and dad, they're here, so can back me up on this.

And I remember telling them that the Mass Conference was saying I could be good fit for this church in Lexington, and it seems like a great church and Lexington, is a cool town. But I have a feeling that a lot of people will apply and they probably won't even consider me because I'm young and I'm just out of seminary—the Mass Conference must be way off with this suggestion.

I told my parents, "Honestly, I don't think I have a shot in hell." But my parents told me to believe in myself, God has a plan, you're awesome, and what's the harm in just sending them

your Profile? The worst they can do is say no and you just move on and send your Profile to another church until you find the right one for you.

Sometimes you need to get a little push or some words of encouragement to take risks. Sometimes you need other people to believe in you when you have moments of self-doubt or a crisis of confidence. But because of this experience and so many others, I truly believe that taking risks can pay off. So I applied to serve Pilgrim Church, I sent my Profile and a CD of a sermon I preached in Wellesley along to the Search Committee. I put myself out there—I took my foot off first base. And here I am!

Now I know that the years ahead of us won't always be 3 point buzzer shots, sticking around to earn As on exams, and rejoicing over an apparently successful search process for both of us. I know that we face some obstacles and that the future won't always be smooth sailing. But I also hope that we can often live into these words: "Behold the turtle. He makes progress only when he sticks his neck out." [4] I've already found that sticking my neck out has paid off; I wouldn't be standing here today if I had just stayed comfortably snug and cozy in my shell.

And I trust that when we do this in community, when we stick our necks out and share new ideas or solutions to old problems, when we put ourselves out there and try new things, we'll be supported when our risks triumph and when they fail. I trust that we won't throw one another in the outer darkness, but extend a hand and keep bringing people to the light—the light of progress, trust, and hope for a bright future.

May it be so with us. Amen.

[1]<http://www.facebook.com/successnation>

[2]<http://www.pioneerthinking.com/achieve.html>"

[3] <http://www.pioneerthinking.com/achieve.html>

[4]James Bryant Conant