



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Reverend Peter Thompson, Vicar

Worth It

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, July 31, 2022

The Eighth Sunday After Pentecost

Based on Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23; Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21

*Take our lives and let them be
Consecrated, Lord, to Thee;
Take our moments and our days,
Let them flow in ceaseless praise.
Amen.*

About a year ago, I was invited to officiate at the wedding of one of my high school classmates. As with many weddings, this one was a reunion of sorts. Friends who had not seen each other for much of the prior decade got a chance to catch up with their former classmates and talk about the ways in which their lives had changed and the ways in which they were still the same people they had always been. As friend and priest, my role was a unique one: I was just another pal, sharing in the joy of the bride and groom, but I was also presider and facilitator, pronouncing God's blessing over the happy couple and witnessing to God's presence at the festivities.

After the ceremony was finished and the cocktail hour had concluded, I found my assigned seat at one of the banquet tables. I greeted the person to my left, whom I had known since I was ten years old. He was the same as he had always been, but he was also different. He was in good shape. He smiled widely. He seemed content in a new and healthy way. We had seen each other sporadically over the years, but we hadn't talked much. While we shared similar social circles, we had never been very close friends. I knew that he had struggled with the early stages of adulthood. Though we both attended the same fancy prep school, college had not come naturally to him. He transferred from one school to another but never graduated. A stint at a tech start-up didn't work out either. He floundered around for a while. And then he found skydiving. Flying through the air made sense to him in a way that nothing else had before. There was something about stepping out into the sky and letting go that was intoxicating and invigorating. It gave him a sense of identity and a sense of purpose. It introduced him to a kind and welcoming community of like-minded individuals. It released him from the pressures his school and background had imposed upon him and the expectations that society had articulated for his life. Now that he was employed as a skydiving instructor, everything was going well for my friend, perhaps for the first time. He was in the longest relationship he had ever been in with a person he clearly valued very much. He had sworn off substances that had caused him harm in the past. He was doing what he loved. He was happy—there was no denying that—and I was happy for him and on his behalf.

Almost exactly a week later, the groom from the wedding called me. Immediately, I could tell that he was distraught. Our friend, he told me, had died. It took a few days for us to learn what had happened. It seems that, in addition to skydiving, our friend was involved in something called BASE jumping: B-A-S-E, standing for buildings, antennas, spans, and earth. It's a form of parachuting that involves starting from

fixed objects on the ground rather than moving vehicles in the sky. As a result, it's a pretty dangerous endeavor. BASE jumpers don't have nearly as much time to deploy their parachutes as skydivers do, so there's less room for error. Our friend had been on a much-anticipated trip to Switzerland, where he had planned on enjoying jumps from some of that country's highest cliffs. Sadly, one of his jumps went wrong.

When it came time for his memorial service, I was chosen to preach. My friend had identified as atheist/agnostic, but he had told others that he enjoyed seeing me do my "priest thing" at the prior week's wedding. His close friends and family thought it would be fitting for me to pay tribute to him. I had no idea what to say, but thankfully I had a few days to prepare. In reflecting on my friend's life and on his death, I did my best to try to comprehend why he was so drawn to hurling through the air. A few articles and a documentary helped me understand the sense of freedom and escape he likely experienced. I also called some mutual friends, who offered their perspectives. For them, my friend's death was complicated. He died doing what he loved, but what he loved led him to his death. They were proud of him for pursuing his passion, they were beyond sad to see him gone, and they were angry at him for putting himself in danger. "He knew the risks," one of our mutual friends told me. Our friend had previously suffered close calls. He had said goodbye to fellow BASE jumpers who had fallen to their deaths. He had warned others not to follow in his footsteps. But he could not turn back from this way of life himself. Skydiving, BASE jumping—they were central to his world and to his soul.

"He knew the risks." The words of our mutual friend played over and over again in my head in the days and weeks that followed. What did it mean that my friend was well-aware of the possible dreadful consequences of his actions and did them anyway? What motivated him to hazard such a chance and was his motivation justified? Were the risks he took "worth it"?

This morning, Jesus offers us the parable of a foolish rich man who, in the wake of a large harvest, decides to tear down his barns and build bigger ones instead. The foolish rich man has more goods than he knows what to do with, and, rather than spend or share the surplus, he decides to save it for future use. While Jesus frames the parable as a denunciation of greed, he also uses the parable to challenge our relationship to risk. It is possible to characterize the foolish rich man as greedy; he amasses and hoards a vast quantity of goods, far more than he currently needs. It is possible, too, to characterize the foolish rich man as hedonistic; he seems most interested in a life of consumption, leisure, and celebration. But the foolish rich man is also risk-averse. He is not primarily interested in maximizing the pleasures of the present; his attention is chiefly focused on minimizing the pains of the future. In storing an extensive treasure trove of goods, he aims to insulate himself from every kind of danger and threat. His efforts, of course, are short-sighted and futile. The foolish rich man cannot fully protect himself from the many potential outcomes that the future may bring. All that the foolish rich man has accumulated and attempted to preserve can vanish in a second, rendering ridiculous his striving and his plans.

Much to the chagrin of security consultants, insurance agents, and financial planners everywhere, Jesus does not in this parable advocate for safety and caution. Nest eggs and rainy day funds, elaborate alarm systems and comprehensive policies are not his concern. To the contrary, Jesus warns us that our desires for safety and caution may be misguided and counterproductive. It is the foolish rich man's saving, not his spending, that causes him problems; it is his anxiety about the future that brings about a future of trouble; it is his longing to avoid danger that leads him right into danger's trap. In the story of the foolish rich man, Jesus invites us to view risk positively, to stop avoiding risk, to start accepting risk and living with it.

"Today," the Danish theologian Neils Gregersen writes, we "know that through our eagerness to take precautions and prevent risk we may incur new risks. For example, we use antibiotics to get rid of infections that would otherwise go out of control. Such use, however, is making bacteria resistant to antibiotics, and future bacteria may get out of our control....If the very preventing of risks creates new risks," Gregersen concludes, "we should realize that *safety*, the traditional counterpart to risk, does not

exist. The road back to Paradise seems to be blocked forever. There seems to be only one way to proceed: forward.”¹

Michael R. Jackson’s Broadway musical *A Strange Loop* was itself a risky venture. A bracingly honest, vulgar, explicit musical about a fat Black gay man writing a musical about a fat Black gay man writing a musical about a fat Black gay man was not the kind of work anyone expected to become a profitable Broadway production during a pandemic. And yet *A Strange Loop* is now in its fourth month playing at the Lyceum Theatre on 45th Street. It was the first musical to win a Pulitzer Prize before opening on Broadway, and it recently won two Tonys, including the Tony for Best Musical.

At a pivotal moment in the plot, the protagonist converses with a rich woman visiting Broadway from out of town. The scene is deliberately humorous and over-the-top, poking fun at the absurdity of a figure who holds such privilege presuming to empathize with a person who suffers from so many disadvantages. The two characters, however, still manage to make a genuine connection, and the protagonist asks the visitor for help with a predicament: he is too scared to write a particular scene in his musical because then, he believes, he will have to enact that same scene in his life. The visitor, reflecting on her own life, shares that she wishes that she had prioritized her own needs sooner. “All my life,” she sings, “I lived for others/made space for every dream except my own/but then one day I looked into the mirror/and saw that I was old and all alone./So my advice: don’t play nice/don’t look back and don’t think twice/don’t let doubt get in the way of what you want;/just roll the dice/stay the course...seize the day/ride the horse into the fray/live your life and tell your story in exactly the same way/truthfully and without fear!” Before leaving the protagonist, she adds this: “If you’re not scared to write the truth then it’s probably not worth writing. And if you’re not sacred of living the truth then it’s probably not worth living. Do you understand?”

BASE jumping. Writing a musical. Moving jobs. Ending a relationship or beginning one. I can’t presume to tell you if the risks you are contemplating this morning are worth it or not. That’s for you to guess and God to know. I can assure you that, like it or not, a life worth living is full to the brim with risk. My hope for you and for me is that, through God’s grace, we may gather the nerve to risk boldly and to follow faithfully on the path laid before us by the Greatest Risk-taker of all, the One who took the risk of creating us, of loving us, of becoming one of us, of dying for us, and of rising to new life once more.

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¹ Neils Gregersen, “Risk and Religion: Toward a Theology of Risk Taking.” *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*.
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1467-9744.00504>.