

3 Epiphany Sermon The Rev. Megan Dembi

As I may have mentioned before, I occasionally indulge in watching daytime television shows—things like Dr. Phil or Family Feud. Well one type of show I generally stay away from are the television courtroom shows—shows like Judge Judy. However, the other day I wanted to have some background noise while I did some busy work, and the People’s Court was on television. I mostly ignored what was happening on the show, until an interesting case seemed to annoy Judge Milian. Two men came into the courtroom. The defendant had a business selling various products over Facebook, and was looking for investors to help him buy more inventory. The plaintiff, the one suing, gave the defendant \$1000 for this purpose, with the stipulation that the defendant must pay him back over \$1800 within 3 weeks. So basically, the plaintiff expected over 80% interest for his loan. The defendant, of course, was unable to come up with this amount of money in such a short period of time, so he was being sued.

Judge Milian explained to the plaintiff that in order for a amount of money given to someone to be considered an investment, there must be risk involved. If you are truly investing \$1000, there can be no guarantee that you will get that \$1000 back, let alone another \$800 on top of it. The plaintiff, however, insisted that the deal was that he would receive over \$1800 in exchange for the \$1000 he originally gave to the defendant and demanded his money. However, this plaintiff was in for a surprise. Judge Milian explained that if that was the case, that the plaintiff demanded a return on his investment with no risk involved, that that was not, in fact, an investment—that it was a usurious loan. In short, the plaintiff was acting as a loan shark, which is illegal. Judge Milian went on to explain that any amount of money given, even to a business, with the stipulation that it must be returned with interest cannot be considered an investment, and any loan percentage above 10% and with a short term length, was considered to be loan sharking. The plaintiff was not pleased, but Judge Milian gave her verdict—that the defendant need only return the original \$1000 given to him, because a true investment always requires risk.

Though the gospel story we heard today doesn’t involve loan sharking, it does involve making an investment—investing in faith—investing in Christ, and the risk involved in the lives of those who make that investment. Soon after John declared Jesus to be the messiah, he is arrested. It seems from the very beginning of Christ’s ministry, those who follow him are not safe. Even from his earliest moments of ministry, those who follow him are in danger, they’re taking a risk. It seems that we are told this story for this very reason--to keep us mindful that what was happening with and around Jesus was not a simple or easy story - it was a story that would change the world and change the people who chose to become involved - and it was a story that was rarely safe. One's earthly life and safety were not guaranteed when following Jesus.

Keeping that in mind, it makes today’s story of Jesus calling the disciples seem a bit more daunting. Peter, Andrew, James, and John very well could have known about what happened to John the Baptist, when Christ asked them to follow him. And they weren’t given any promises of a return on this investment. Jesus doesn’t say to them, "If you follow me I will make you rich" or "I will make you comfortable" or "I will give you security". He merely said "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." These men were fishermen, so they were no strangers to fishing, but in making this request, Christ shows them their greater calling, that they can use their gifts and talents for the benefit of others and for the glory of God. Christ is showing them a return on their investment, not a financial return, but a faithful one. "Follow me, and the gifts I've given you that you're already using will then serve the Kingdom of Heaven."

We only know so much of the risk that is ahead of us when it comes to following Jesus. We aren't given a contract with lots of fine-print and terms; we aren't asked to sign away a portion of our

assets with this investment; we aren't expecting a safe, small return yield on our investment. Christ asks for our lives so that we might gain them—that we might obtain life that is eternal; there is no partial anything in this investment - as CS Lewis wrote, "Give me all of you!!! I don't want so much of your time, so much of your talents and money, and so much of your work. I want you, all of you."

Our investment with Christ is different than any other investment we'll ever make because there are no half-measures in God. We cannot expect to give God a part of ourselves as if only a part of us could follow Christ, or a part of us could be made new, or a part of us could inherit the Kingdom. Though that may feel safer, it's not truly possible. In order to invest in Christ, we have to be willing to take on risk. But the greatest risk when choosing whether or not to follow Christ isn't what might happen to us if we do follow him - it's what life looks like if we don't. To follow Christ is to know we are inheritor's of Christ's promises, even when we don't know exactly what that will mean for our earthly lives. We know from scripture that following Jesus, picking up our cross, means that we know him to be the way, the truth, and the life, and that following him is not without risk. That is our investment, that though road we follow may take us places that are dangerous or uncertain, we who have inherited this faith and these scriptures know that to follow the cross of Christ and to pick up our own cross when he calls us is to know that our investment is in the way of life.

So where is Jesus calling each of us? Like Peter and Andrew, maybe he's calling us to use gifts we already have for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. Like James and John, maybe he's calling us to leave something familiar and comfortable for the sake of something new, something a little bit different, to a place that we will not know until Christ shows us. Like Isaiah and John the Baptist, maybe God is calling us to proclaim the good news, to tell others about this great light of Christ that has come into the world. Like Paul, maybe we are called to remember that the glory of God came from the stumbling block of the cross. But no matter who we are or what our gifts are, Christ is calling each of us to invest in him, to follow him wherever he may lead us, regardless of the risk, to remember that we, too, are called to go into the world proclaiming the good news, and always to remember and live by his simple words: follow me. Amen.