

Whence the Spirit?

By Rev. Joe Connolly

“Then Peter said, ‘Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?’” — Acts 10:46b-47.

I have lived long enough so I know this to be true: life is unpredictable. I have lived long enough so I know this to be true: as we live through our time, more often than we like, life demands we take risk.

I have lived long enough so I know this to be true: very few of us like to take risks. We like control.

One could argue I have taken a lot of risks in my life. If that is true— that I am a risk taker— it could be a result of my experience in my family of origin. I will I HOPE not go deep into detail about this because I have done so before.

But for those of you who have never heard this story about my childhood, let me offer a short version. I profoundly apologize to those who have heard this before. I hope it does not bore you too much.

When I was about five years old my father had what was in that era called a nervous breakdown. Today the condition would have been diagnosed as the onset of a mental illness labeled as passive dependency, sometimes called passive aggression.

One of a myriad consequences for me is at a very young age my father figure left the scene. From a Freudian perspective one of a myriad of functions a father figure provides for children is a sense of order along with the safety we feel order brings.

This is not to say father figures are a necessity. Many get along without a father figure quite well. I did. But it is to say, in my case at least, I developed a degree of comfort with the idea that life might lean more toward the chaotic than the ordered.

Equally, since I identified true safety as at best a possibility but perhaps unrealistic, I became inclined toward taking risks. To illustrate, I'll offer some of my later life story which again, many of you have heard. That chaos and risk were going to be a part of my existence got reinforced in my late teens since I was drafted and wound up in Vietnam, where chaos and risk were a given.

For the next 20 years on an off I worked in professional theater as a writer— theater where risks are a given. What risks? How do you earn enough to put food on the table and how do you effectively communicate through art? To paraphrase the words of the late artist Al Hirshfield, the product we artists sell no one really needs to buy.

Let's move the clock ahead a full 20 years. I meet Bonnie. She lives in Maine. I live in New York City.

I move to Maine to marry Bonnie. I don't even know how to drive but I move to Maine where the only subways are sandwich shops. Yes, I think that was a risk.

Move the clock ahead yet again 4 years. At age 44 I hear the call to Seminary. Now at age 44 Seminary is a risk. I invite Bonnie to take that risk with me.

Praise God, she does. And yes— I, for one, count that as a expression of true love— a willingness to take a risk

with a risk taker.

And then, and then— we take another risk together. Four years later we find ourselves in a place Norwich, New York. We had visited here only once for several days, meet with the search committee and looked around town before we took that risk.

And yes, we have been here for quite some time. Just the very length of time spent here has brought order to our lives. But now we shall be embarking on another risk in fourteen months— retiring, moving back to Maine.

I want to say two things about retiring and moving back to Maine, both of which are simply honest. First, retirement and the very thought of moving after 20 years plus here frightens the living daylights out of me. All kinds of things could go wrong.

Second, yes— this too is a risk, a big one. You might suggest it is a necessary risk. I would agree. Necessity does not make it a smaller risk. (Slight pause.)

This is found in Luke/Acts in the section of that work known as Acts. “Then Peter said, ‘Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?’” (Slight pause.)

Recently I was in a conversation with a group of pastors. One of them expressed a very specific concern.

People in congregations seemed to be expressing fear of all kinds. These range from a fear about what’s happening in politics, to fear about their own source of income, their jobs, to fear about people who are not a member of their own group. And yes— there is fear about the church, about congregational vitality.

In response I suggested two things. Whatever you see going on in society outside the walls of a church building will be seen inside the walls of a church building.

The church is not immune to what’s happening in the culture. And right now what we see in the culture is widespread fear.

Second, I suggested fear is not the root, the cause. It’s a reaction, a symptom, a result, rather than a cause. People, I said to the group, people become afraid about a broad range of things for one reason and one reason only.

People become afraid when they feel they are not in control. When you are not in control, taking a risk is a given. And as I said earlier, taking risk, therefore by definition not being in control, is something with which we humans have a hard time.

Well, as if to reaffirm that thought, I came across an interesting piece of data this week. A poll was released which showed an amazing result.

People on the political left *and* people on the political right both think they are on the losing side in our society. Yes, both sides think they are losing— simply amazing.

I want to suggest all that poll really shows is not the fact that one side or the other thinks they are losing. It shows us people are afraid of losing. But I also want to suggest the possibility of losing turns into fear because we think losing means we are not in control. (Slight pause.)

The Rev. Dr. Emily Heath will be the speaker at the New York Conference of the United Church of Christ Annual Meeting this year. Her most recent book is *Courageous Faith*.

Not too far into this work Heath brings up a human reaction to risk most of us have probably heard about. The response is commonly called flight or fight. She points out there is another response those who research these things have recently agreed on: freeze.

So, one's response to risk can be flight or fight or freeze. Heath then goes on to delineate, describe what she calls a Christian reaction. She says we need to respond to the world and the reality we see in the world with action— moral action. And moral action is the place to which God invites us.

I'm not sure why she fails to use another word beginning with the letter 'F' to reenforce the alliteration of the 'flight,' 'fight' and 'freeze'— that combination. I shall a word with an 'F.'

I say the Christian response to the risk that *is* the reality of the world is 'forward'— flight, flight, freeze, forward. We need to move forward, strive to listen to God, work toward the world God sees, work with the arc of moral justice envisioned by God, cooperate with God, with the Spirit of God, God Who we, as Christians, believe is present among us.

Put another way— yes, yes— Christians do assess risk. But we also seek to find the places to which God calls us. And I would suggest God calls us to places where risk is real, tangible. Or as least we humans perceive the risk in these places as real and tangible.

You see, I think we humans generally have a strange sense of what risk really is. I think we have a strange sense of what risk really is because *we like to be in control*. We like it when things go only our way. If the poll I quoted earlier about most people think they are on the losing side does not prove that premise, that we like to be in control, I don't know what does.

As to the theological issue here, let me say something you have probably often heard. Just like we want to be in control, we humans like to put God in a box. We like to domesticate God, control God.

Which raises what I think of as a significant question: are we in control, really? Perhaps more to the point— do we really want to be in control? (Slight pause.)

I think we need to be willing to cooperate with God as we go *forward*, forward toward the freedom God seeks for us, God wants for us. If God is who we say God is— a God who seeks peace, loves justice, treasures equity, then putting God in a box *will not* empower us to see the world the way God sees the world. (Slight pause.)

So I guess I, for one, am a risk taker. Why? I want to move forward. I want to cooperate with the will of God, be empowered by God to seek freedom, love justice, treasure equity.

I suspect we humans need to stop trying to put God in a box. When we let God out of the box, we get to a place where the justice, the freedom, the equity, the peace, the joy, the hope, the love God wants us to have will be a reality. Amen.

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ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and

Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “Here’s a pithy saying for you: ‘We will never change the world by going to church. We will change the world by being church.’ I want to suggest being church means we need to let God be God and we need to participate in the work of God here, now since it seems to me the world could use the justice, freedom, the equity, the peace, the joy, the hope and love of God which we, the church, claim to be about. Given what theology says about God and what God seeks for us, I think being church means taking risk.”

BENEDICTION: May the Holy Spirit inspire our words, and God’s love in Christ empower our deeds, as, in Christ, we are no longer servants, but friends, learning to love as we have been loved. And may the peace of God which surpasses our understanding keep our hearts and minds in the knowledge of God, the love of Jesus, the Christ, and the companionship of the Holy Spirit, this day and forevermore. Amen.