

Drawn In – Part 3: Risking
November 3, 2019
by Rev. Dr. Chris Alexander

Scripture: Matthew 25:14-30, Proverbs 4:25-27
NEW MEMBER SUNDAY - FAMILY WORSHIP

I. Identity: “We are faithful; therefore, we are not afraid.”

Scripture: Matthew 25:14-30

Good Morning! We are technically in our third week of our series ***Drawn In: A Creative Process for Artists, Activists, and Jesus Followers*** based on a book written by Troy Bronsik in 2012. This series is a discussion surrounding Phoenix Affirmation #4 which encourages us to: *Express our love in worship that is as sincere, vibrant, and artful as it is scriptural.*

Troy’s book *Drawn In* provides us practices, activities and exercises that are aimed at deepening our connection with the Holy, or widening our relationships with the Divine. Troy frames these practices within a six-part discernment process that is designed to help boost our overall creativity within our ongoing conversations with God and each other. The six frames Troy identifies are: (1) Dreaming, (2) Hovering, (3) Risking, (4) Listening, (5) Reintegrating, and (6) Resting.

In the last two weeks, Eric spoke to the ideas of Dreaming and Hovering. He introduced some new concepts into our community that have come from his own personal dreaming and experiences that lends us new language for how we might move into our calling here at the Tri-Faith, and how God is participating with us in discerning our next best steps. We have fulfilled our discernment of stepping into the interfaith conversation, and accomplished what we needed, in order to stand here on the Tri-Faith Commons with our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters. Now we need to restart our discernment process again with the intent of exploring what it means to live into being neighbors to one another, and how we participate together in what God is already doing in the world around us.

This new discernment path is not an easy task, and it is not something that we can build a traditional strategic plan around, checking off our “to do” lists as we go along. These discernments take time, and conversation. We need to leave pauses for listening, and spaces for thinking and picturing things in a new light. We need to let the dreams formulate within and among us and listen to all the voices who are in this process with us: our own congregation, as well as those who are affected by the decisions we make and ministries that will emerge from our discernment.

Along with the whole process of discernment is the context in which we find ourselves. We are not living in a vacuum. We are Christians, living in the Midwest of the United States, in a world where chaos seems to be growing stronger and stronger. What was once considered “stable” has been shifting into living streams that appear to have no patterns to them at all. There doesn’t seem to be much of a “normal” anymore.

Within this shifting environment, I would like to introduce a new voice into our conversations on discernment who, I think, can help us with our discerning process. Her name is Margaret Whealey and

she is our next Center for Faith Studies speaker, who will be leading an all-day workshop for us about discerning in the midst of all the disruption in our lives. Dr. Wheatley is an organizational theorist who has studied the sciences and our social systems in order to help identify how our world self organizes itself in differing contexts. Her latest book “Who Do We Choose to Be?” speaks to what she believes to be our current context and suggests ways to face the reality of our situation so that we might turn to one another in care and compassion as we move through what lies ahead for all of us.

In describing the context in which we find ourselves Wheatley asks, “*Why have over 65 million people fled their home countries and now live as refugees? What is being done to address our enduring human needs for homes, for community, for contribution, for good work, for safe children? And what about our planet?*” These questions suggest that we no longer have stable patterns of living that people can turn to in our shifting world. We must use whatever creativity we can muster to find new patterns for living in a world that is unpredictable, and is constantly changing the rules of engagement we have with one another. Building this kind of creativity involves taking risks, thinking outside our normal patterns and traditional strategies. We will need new language, new images, new prophets and dreamers that will help us envision a new way of being.

Today, we are exploring this idea of risking.

Our scripture from the Gospel of Matthew speaks to taking a chance and risking an unknown outcome. At first reading, the servant who buried the talents he had been given, for fear of the master, seems to have been justified in his actions, since the master did indeed react harshly with the servant, sending him “to the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth” Ouch! But if we are talking about this concept of building creativity and taking the risk to explore new possibilities through expanding our patterns, then it is the master who seems justified in his harshness with the servant because they could not let go of their assumptions about the master in order to risk building something new onto what had been given to them.

So, what is it, either in who we are, or in the circumstances that we find ourselves in, that gives us the courage or the strength to risk the unknown, in order to make way for a new possibility? What would it take for each of you to risk a “harsh consequence” in order to try a different way of doing something? Do we have to be certain of the outcomes of our actions before we take the first steps? Think back to a time in your own lives when you considered taking a huge risk – what were the conditions surrounding your decision?

At Countryside, we proclaim every week that “we are loved beyond our wildest imaginations.” This belief is not based the outcome of our actions, nor is it considered a reward of having the proper belief systems in our lives. It is not the result of finding ourselves living with the privilege of accessibility to resources, education, and sustainability, while many within our own country, as well as billions all around the world struggle daily just to find their next meal, or a safe place for their children to rest each night. In fact, it is not based on anything we do, but rather speaks to who God is and how God relates to all of us. The relationship God established with us in creation is the very ground of who we are, and how we behave in the world. Our courage, as those created by God, comes from this very ground, or starting point in our lives, not from any outcomes or consequences of our actions. It is our very identity of being a child of God that presents us with the possibility of stepping out in a new way

to participate with all of creation. Our certainty is in God's love, not in ourselves. Is there anything then, we can't risk, just to see how creation might expand through trying a new thing?

In her book, Margaret Wheatley speaks about a group of Nuns across the United States who were being investigated by the Vatican authorities for their compliance to the doctrines of the Catholic Church. Though these sisters were dealing with harsh authorities, and though they felt betrayed by the very institution who had received their vows to follow the ways of Christ and the church, they moved through the three years of investigations repeating the mantra "we are faithful: therefore, we are not afraid." Their very identity included God, and therefore God was present with them in every risky step they took forward through these investigations.

How does this work for us in our lives? How does our mantra of "We are loved beyond our wildest imaginations" identify who we are and give us the courage to participate in an ever-changing and unpredictable world? As we listen to our musical offering, consider how the idea of "risk" changes if God is involved in risk along with us.

II. Leading with Integrity

Scripture: **Proverbs 4:25-27**

The risk we face in our discerning is not in the ground of our identity, but in learning to face the reality of the situations in which we find ourselves. By ignoring or denying parts or all of the stories that surround our living, we risk missing the clarity we need to let go of all the things that are stopping us from stepping out most fully into life.

The story Margaret Wheatley tells about the Nuns facing investigations from the Vatican gives us an example of how we, as people of faith can lead others in times of transition or shifting patterns of being in the world. The key to this type of leadership is to risk seeing the clarity of our situation. Wheatley tells us that leaders in these times must act out of a wholeness, or a wholeheartedness, that includes a willingness to take in the entire picture of where we are, the good and the bad, the stuff that is helpful, as well as the stuff that presents us with a challenge. How the Nuns behaved during the Vatican investigations gives us an example of what leading with integrity looks like in the clarity of challenge.

Wheatley identifies five behaviors of the Nuns that she believes exemplifies leading with integrity. One behavior was that the sisters never lost sight of their identity as children, created and called by God, and therefore continued to act with respect toward the other, staying open to learning, while seeking to developing relationships of trust within their discussions. By living out of the courage of their identity, they were able to face the harsh demands of those in power without fear.

Another behavior identified was the Sister's insistence on keeping the process slow enough to include all of the voices affected by the investigation and allowing the space and the time for contemplation and discernment in the midst of the discussions. Wheatley tells us they made no decisions in haste.

There was also never a time when just a small group made decisions on behalf of the whole community, but rather they developed the practice of turning to one another in conversation and in common prayer, seeking to build a consensus in their responses.

They also took the time to educate themselves and each other with the background, history, trends and dynamics of the issues they were facing, and trusted in their skills and abilities to test out a diverse set of responses so they could be better informed about which response best represented who they were as a community and how they were being called into participation with God.

And they accomplished all of these behaviors while making sure everyone affected by the situation was participating in their response to the demands of the investigation.

Our Proverbs scripture reminds us to keep our eyes and our feet straight before us and our ways will be sure. If we base our courage to take risks on God's love for us, the very identity of who we are, we will always be stepping into our future with integrity and wholeheartedness.

We, at Countryside, have actually already experienced this type of leading with integrity and risking our futures based on how we felt God calling us. Our discernment concerning how we might participate in the Tri-Faith Initiative was very similar to the process taken by the Nuns. The first step we took in our discernment together was identifying the values that were part of our Countryside identity and holding them up as guidelines, testing out a wide spectrum of participation possibilities with the other faith partners of the Tri-Faith. We took the time to include the voices of all those affected by our choices and we kept the process participatory, while insisting that any decisions were made by the whole congregation and not just a few people.

We spent time educating ourselves through classes, small and large group discussions, community panel discussions, movies, and lectures. We also spent time in contemplation and prayer, listening for God's voice among us. Our discernment took a year and a half, but we accomplished it together as a community grounded in the belief that we are loved beyond our wildest imaginations. We, like the Nuns, let our identity in God's love be the courage we needed to risk stepping into our future without any certainty of where our footsteps would lead us.

And now we are here.

Being here presents us with a whole new set of challenges and discernments. We are being asked to risk new ways of being neighbors and new ways to interpret our stories of tradition, so that we might discover new ways of experiencing God with us. And, we are constantly adding new voices into the discussion. We welcome a whole new group of these voices today as we celebrate our new members at our 11:00 worship.

Through our continual discernments of dreaming, hovering, risking, listening, reintegrating and resting, we are boosting our creativity, deepening our connection with the Holy, and widening our relationships with each other and with God. What do you think? Is it worth the risk?

Amen.