

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor
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All Saints Sunday
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On Not Hedging Our Bets: An All Saints Sunday Meditation and Challenge

(Mark 10:17-27 NRSV) As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before [Jesus], and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 18 Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 19 You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'" 20 He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." 21 Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." 22 When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. 23 Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" 24 And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25 It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." 26 They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" 27 Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

I have shared with you several times that my friend of 40+ years, Bob Hill, and I have made it a tradition for the last 30 years or so to get together at least annually to reconnect and visit and often do some traveling together. These times together, what we refer to with the silly name of "Boys Camp" have become the best continuing education and spiritual renewal times that I have, as Bob and I share what we've been reading and thinking, brainstorm about church and ministry, talk and pray together. In the beginning, when our knees were in better shape and our wallets weren't, those annual get-togethers indeed took the form of camping. For the last 10 or 15 years, though, they have more often instead involved a road trip for several days through the desert southwest. We will also often spend one night in Las Vegas or Reno. Bob likes to play roulette. Usually, we split up as he goes looking for a \$2.00 game and I head for the video poker to play the nickel machines (you can see we're both big spenders). Most of

the time my luck has been so poor that it occurred to me that I might have a more productive evening if I just handed my \$20.00 bill to the staff at the door instead of taking two hours to lose it. A few years ago, though, I decided to join Bob playing roulette; I'd never played it before – probably because I hate situations where I don't know what I'm doing and don't know the rules. But Bob said he'd show me what I needed to know. So we sat down to play – and I saw three strange things that evening. First, big spender that I am, I bought \$20.00 worth of chips, and for lack of anything better, I put \$2.00 on number 23, my birthday. And it hit. So I did it again. And it hit again. And again. **Six** times in a row, the number 23 came up. That was strange thing number one. The second strange thing to me was how many people were looking at the board showing the last several numbers to “hit” and somehow thinking that that had anything whatsoever to do with the next number to “hit” since, of course, each new spin is a completely random outcome. What's hit in the past makes no difference to what hits in the future. So that was strange thing number two: the people who really thought that there was some predictive power in what had happened the last few spins. But in many ways the strangest thing of all that evening – something I told you about a few sermons ago – was the man who sat there for two hours, and at each and every spin, he would put \$2.00 on the black numbers and \$2.00 on the red numbers. He almost never lost anything but he of course he surely never won anything either. But he sat there for two hours playing these hedged bets, perfectly content to stay put, never really risking getting hurt but never risking getting any better either. I thought to myself *“This is so strange: why would you play like that? What is the point? It's safe, sure, but it's boring!”*

And then there was the man who came to Jesus with his own question:
“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Or, if we broaden his question a bit –

for this is surely what is being asked when he, or you, or I or anyone find ourselves with this question – he is asking *“What must I do in order to know, in order to secure, that my life is ultimately meaningful and significant and authentic?”* And Jesus’ answer was basically *“Don’t hedge your bets.”* Did you hear it? Jesus said, *“It is good indeed that you have kept the commandments and the law but there is one more thing: Go sell what you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven – and come, follow Me.”* Ouch. Jesus does have this way of cutting to the chase. He zeroed right in on the man’s anxiety and on the fact that he didn’t quite want to give his life wholeheartedly over to God. Jesus said, in essence, that that man needed to give up any lingering faith that by his own efforts he could secure his ultimate destiny or that his possessions could save him or that his good looks or his way with words or his secret prides would finally matter. *“Acknowledge,”* Jesus was saying to that man, *“that **God is the only ultimacy – and then live as if you fully believed that.**”* But the story then tells us that the man said *“Well.....”* and turned around and went away disheartened – because he had wanted to hedge his bets.

I don’t know about you, but this story of Jesus is one of those that makes me wince. And it does so for two reasons: First of all, there are some things that I hold deep down that I sometimes would prefer, if I’m honest, not to give over to God and be rid of. I have a few quiet and long-lasting resentments, for example, about things done to me, which, truth be told, I sort of like taking out from time to time and polishing them up and looking at them again and getting energy all over again from those resentments. Even if, in my smarter moments, I know that they truly represent a hedging of my bets, a failure on my part to trust in God’s offer to redeem the past and preferring, instead, to nurse those wounds like some sort of badge of honor. Do any of you do that? It’s so tempting isn’t it? But the truth is, as with any hedged bet, it just means that you or I

stay stuck there; it means that there is a part of our heart and mind and soul that walls itself off from the possibility of God's transforming and renewing and forgiving grace. And it means that my relationship with the one who caused the hurt can never get any better. That doesn't mean that it **will** get better if I let go and fully trust in God – sometimes such relationships simply don't – but if I continue to hold on to those resentments then there is **no** chance of that happening, **no** chance of transformation, **no** chance of renewal because I make it so very difficult for God to act in my life by that holding on.

The second reason that the story of the man who went away sad, who wanted to hedge his bets makes me wince is that he in his own way represents fear. And I know about fear of the future, and I know that you do too. Like the man who happily sat for two hours at the roulette table, betting simultaneously on red and black, there is part of me that resists change and even fears it at times, and is happy – or at least I think and pretend I'm happy – not having anything change, for good or bad. There is part of me that loves what was. There is part of me that is prone to nostalgia, to identifying something in the past as the way things "should" be and being ever-so-reluctant to want to follow God fully and faithfully and wholeheartedly into a new future. Because the future can be scary. Moreover, the future can be work; it takes energy. And that's hard. I **want to want** to follow Jesus wholeheartedly, but, on the other hand, there is part of me that identifies with St. Augustine's prayer before he was converted: "*Lord, make me virtuous – but not yet.*" There is a part of me that says in response to Jesus' "*Come, follow me*" that wants to say "*I'll follow you if I can stay where I am.*" Does that fit for any of you as well?

When Barbara and I were first out of seminary, we lived in a small west Texas desert town. The town had a bi-weekly newspaper and on Wednesdays it printed the

police report for the past week. This was the section that everyone turned to first so they would have their gossip fodder while drinking coffee at the Dairy Queen or at the – this was its actual name – The Biscuits and Gravy Restaurant. After all, you wanted to see if you knew anyone who had been arrested or recognized the address of a house where the police had been summoned. I have forgotten all of those police reports except one; it went like this: *“Police were summoned to a home on the west side where the owner reported that someone had broken into his house, and re-arranged the furniture on his porch and the items in his refrigerator.”* My friends, as I reflect today on the story of the man who wanted to know what he needed to do to truly have a meaningful life, a life of significance, eternal life, I am struck by this thought: On this All Saints Sunday, when we remember and honor and give thanks for those saints of this congregation who have died in the last year, I am very, very grateful that those folks were not ones who were content to hedge their bets, were not ones who made sure that nothing in their lives was ever re-arranged for the sake of some higher good and calling. Most of all, I am grateful that these ones whose names lie on the page in front of us – or those ones of your family or friends whom you call to mind on this day who are no longer with us – are ones in your lives or in the life of this church who did decide that they would be ones who would “bless the future.” To “bless the future.” What does that mean?

Well, I can do no better than that image that a friend tells of from when he was driving down an east Tennessee back-road and saw a very old grandfather or great-grandfather helping a very young grandson to plant an oak tree beside their mobile home. Here was one indeed who knew how to bless the future. And isn't that a profound image? For that tree wouldn't come to maturity until long after the man was gone, and that mobile home might well likely take up residence elsewhere. But through whatever changes came, that oak would be there to be a blessing to those who came

after, who could enjoy its shade and towering presence, and wherever that mobile home wandered it would be blessed by those who had offered their love within its walls. What it means to bless the future is indeed to plant oaks that we won't sit under, and yet to be glad, very glad, that **someone** will sit under them, **someone** will enjoy them, **someone** will be enriched by them.

It is the same in our lives or in the life of our church, too. Think about the people you have known who, nearing the end of their lives, who are most at peace, who seem to have the most joy. Aren't they the ones who have accepted the fact that they won't see all the fruits of their labors and yet are glad that someone will? Aren't they the ones who delight in blessing those new folks who are stepping forward to do things in new ways? Aren't they the ones who so clearly take delight in the fact that their work will live on in new ways through new people in new situations? Compare that with those folks who are resentful of a future that they will not see, who are fueled with frustration at a future that they won't be a part of, who find it hard to accept new things? Which ones do you think do a better job of not hedging their bets? Which ones can God work through easily and bountifully and beautifully?

Our call as individuals and as a church is indeed not to hedge our bets by ever somehow – even inadvertently – trying to thwart or stymie what the future can hold, even when we won't see that future and even when we know that it will be different in this or that way than we might have wished if it were up to us. But the point is that we are called to accept joyfully and generously that it is in fact not up to us, but is up to God and those whom God will call. And, my friends, isn't that sort of freeing? Aren't you glad that **you** don't have to secure the future all by yourselves? Aren't you glad that it is indeed in God's hands, in both those who will follow in your footsteps and in the life of this church which you have loved? For, to be sure, one of the beautiful things that can and will happen in our beloved congregation is that God will continue to work

new things, God will continue raise up new leaders in this place, and ***our job is to bless that***. Our job is to never hedge our bets by insisting whether in our individual lives or in the life of our church that there is only, say, one way of doing things, one way that's right. Our job is to put all our chips on the God who indeed seeks a bounteous future, in ways that may well surprise us.

So, on this All Saints Sunday, that is my challenge to both myself and to you this day: As we give thanks for those who have gone before us, as we remember all the ways that we have been formed and shaped and made who we are by the generosity and hope of those whom God has blessed us with, as we gratefully call to mind all the ways that the future is better because of their lives, let us indeed resolve that you and I will be ones who never hedge our bets, that we will be ones who resolve that our lives will be about planting trees that we will never sit under, that we will be ones who even in the midst, sometimes, of hard things are those who want indeed to bless the future knowing that the future is always, always in God's good and gracious and gentle hands. Amen!