



**RISKY BUSINESS**  
**SCRIPTURE: JEREMIAH 29:1, 4-7; LUKE 17: 11-19**  
**GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC**  
**October 9, 2016**  
The Rev. Dr. Marcia Mount Shoop, Pastor

**Luke 17:11-19**

17:11 On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee.

17:12 As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance,

17:13 they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

17:14 When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean.

17:15 Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice.

17:16 He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan.

17:17 Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?"

17:18 Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?"

17:19 Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

The Word of the Lord  
**Thanks be to God**

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It was fourth grade for Ella Bounds when everything changed.<sup>1</sup>

A routine visit with the doctor to get her yearly shots revealed a skin lesion on her leg. The doctor pricked it with a needle and she felt nothing.

A few days later, in a one room school house in Abita Springs, LA

A truck pulls up and a man gets out with a gun. He tells the teacher to pick up Ella and bring her outside.

Ella saw a big word on the side of the truck that she didn't understand. The man in the truck drove her to her house where he told her father that he had to take Ella away. The word on the truck was Quarantine.

It was the 1920s and Ella had leprosy. They took her to Carville, LA and she never saw her family again.

Ella lived out her days at Carville among hundreds of other people with leprosy or Hansen's disease.

Leprosy, a bacteria of biblical proportions; a disease that took its victims out of community, that so terrified people that even 4<sup>th</sup> grade children, were taken from their homes and families and were imprisoned way past the margins of society.

People suffering from Hansen's disease in the continental United States were brought to Carville like criminals, often in shackles. They lost their right to vote, their right to freedom, their right to own property, to legally marry, to raise children. And they could never leave.

Carville was the country's cure for leprosy—those afflicted were throwaway people, those not afflicted could stay safely away from them. Thousands of years of fear, bias, and judgment defined collective reactions—many saw leprosy as God's judgment for sin, a moral disease that marked the unclean. Carville was all about risk abatement for those who counted themselves the lucky ones—or even the righteous ones.

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Jesus was no stranger to this disease that created outcasts, this affliction that helped define the margins of ancient Middle Eastern society.

He encounters ten people with leprosy standing outside an encampment on his journey to Jerusalem.

The afflicted were to stand outside the bounds of their community and shout to others "unclean" to warn others to stay away from them.

Those marked as unclean were drafted into the risk abatement business—mandated to use their own voices to protect others from their fate.

Jesus encounters the ten, shouting to him, not to stay away from them, but for mercy. "Master, have mercy on us."

These ten see a powerful possibility in Jesus—and shouting something they are not supposed to is worth the risk. This is the first time we hear people who were not

disciples call Jesus “Master.” And they use “mercy” to describe what they are asking for—an expectation reserved for God, for anticipated visitations of God.

Jesus tells the ten to go see the priests—the only ones who could pronounce them clean. “Clean” meant they could return to their families, “clean” meant they could rejoin society.

The ten do as Jesus tells them and head out to find the priests—one realizes what is happening. He is being healed, and that he has witnessed a manifestation of God right before his eyes. This one, with the eyes to see, goes back and glorifies God, prostrates himself at Jesus’ feet—a posture one only should take in the presence of God.

This one was a Samaritan. He was way outside the bounds because of ethnicity, geography, and his disease.

Jesus uses risk as a way to connect. Jesus embraces risk as a way to glorify God. Jesus shows us how risk gives us glimpses of God kingdom right in front of our eyes. IF we have the eyes to see.

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Horses are defined by an addiction to fear.

As prey animals who take up a large amount of space and whose most effective defense mechanism is to run, they are always on alert. And they do not like to be alone.

Nature’s risk management strategy for horses is the herd. And the herd is so intricately tuned in to each other that one twitch of the alpha mares’ head can set off a stampede to safer ground. They turn in concert with each other; they speak the language of fear and fondness with their intuitions of connection and context.

Horses tell us they feel safe when they mutually graze, when one feels free enough to role in the grass while others graze.

Horses take risks that help them survive when they are in a herd. Horses takes risks that often put them in harms way when they are taken out of a herd—like running through fences, like panicking around humans who often respond to a crazed 1000 lb animal with force and violence. Horses read us humans like a book. They don’t like angry people, they don’t like scared people, and they don’t like unpredictable people.

Horses know the necessity of connections you can trust. And they will avoid those you can’t trust at all cost.

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The prophet Jeremiah did a strange thing, a decidedly unprophet-like thing.

He wanted to get a message to elders from Jerusalem who remained in exile in Babylon—those who had been deported from their homes by an occupying nation.

We'd expect a prophet to tell the exiles to stiffen their necks, resist the temptation to give up, risk discord to push back against the aggressors.

Instead Jeremiah calls on the deported elders to accept where they are and build life from there.

It is a startling kind of risk he invites from the elders—trust what has happened, trust your life, and trust that God is at work in your lives even in exile. He is asking them to come to terms with their plight and risk an unexpected opportunity to thrive. Don't hitch your wagons to those who preach immediate deliverance.

It was a time of shifting power in that region, a time of Assyrian decline when their monarchy had run its course. So some would say Jeremiah is being pragmatic. But his prophetic call is categorically different than pragmatism.

Jeremiah is calling on the elders of exile to take a Holy Risk—to be those who stand in the gap of exile and **know who they are by** choosing life, relationship, growing things, building, creating, loving.

Jeremiah is saying that the people of God do not lose their identity by being displaced; they can only lose their way when they distort and distract themselves with grasping, grasping for a place that they think enables them to live faithfully.

Faith, belief, trusting God is risky business, brothers and sisters in Christ, and we are being called to risk such a radical sense of ourselves as God's people in this time and place.

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Ella Bounds must have been afraid when she arrived at Carville—such a young child in a strange place under such confusing circumstances.

Ella lost her legs to leprosy and spent decades moving around Carville in a wooden hand crank wheel chair.

That is where Neil White, a white-collar criminal convicted of bank fraud, found her in the 1980s. By that time Carville had only about 130 Hansen's disease patients because medical science had found a cure and society had gotten wiser about the fact that leprosy really isn't so contagious after all. With space to spare, Carville also became a minimum-security prison for inmates like Neil.

Neil had no idea what Carville was when he arrived, but quickly figured out that it was a place where he would be challenged in ways he hadn't anticipated when he packed t-shirts and a racquetball racket for his 18 months doing soft time.

Ella was one of the first people he saw when he arrived. She rolled by him in her hand-cranked wheelchair and said, "There's no place like home."

Once Neil figured out that the people with mitten hands, lost limbs, and disfigured faces were part of a leper colony, he was terrified. He knew prison would be a struggle, but now he feared he would catch leprosy and never get to see his wife and children again.

One morning he and Ella were in the cafeteria early, just the two of them. And Ella began to fall out of her wheel chair. Neil was afraid to touch her, but finally he took a risk and put his arms under her arms and pulled her back up into her wheel chair. That was the first time he touched one of the people with leprosy at Carville. And from there, his whole life changed.

After listening to Ella's story about how she came to Carville as a young girl, Neil was overcome—not altogether sure with what. Shame? Wonder? Curiosity? Horror?

Ella asked him if he would push her back to her room once they were done talking. Neil said, "Prisoners aren't supposed to interact with patients. I could get in trouble." And Ella replied, "What are they going to do, put you in jail?"

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Holy Risk is not fool-hearted risk; it is a sacred cross roads. Holy Risk opens our eyes to opportunities to trust God's mysterious power to transform, to redeem.

Holy Risk is about taking a chance on love, trusting an unexpected moment, an unlikely place for growth, a chance for new eyes to see God's kingdom in our midst.

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Are we ready, Grace Covenant, to buoy up our courage and risk trusting God's Spirit moving in our midst? To trust what's happening at 789 Merrimon Avenue, we're going to have to risk trusting a mysterious God, a God who is calling us to see what manifestations of redemption and resurrection and healing are right in front of our eyes.

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Horses tell us something very important about the most life-giving way to take a risk. They take it together.

Collective risk that comes from wisdom can lead to life-enhancing situations—life-giving decisions that can make us stronger and make the world better.

We have a strong herd, Grace Covenant. Are we going to run away from what is emerging in this place? Or are we going to seize the day? Are we going to take a risk and invest in this unlikely situation in 2016 in Asheville, NC?

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One of Neil's last nights at Carville the leprosy patients have a dance.

Ella asks if he can stick around for one song. Neil pushes Ella in her antique wheel chair around the edges of the dance floor and Ella waves her arms like she is flying.

Neil gave himself to this moment—to Ella's delight and to the freedom she felt in the quarantine to be just where she should be.

Ella made life there in exile with a heart grateful enough to stretch into the life of a man who had always cared more about how things looked than how they felt.

Just before Neil left Carville he asked Ella, "Any advice?"

Ella said, "Don't forget to go to church."

Neil would later write that he didn't want just any church. "I want a church like Carville, where parishioners are broken, chipped and cracked. A place to go when I need help... A place where outcasts find a home, where the disfigured are beautiful."

Being church is risky business. Trusting this place, this sacred unfolding means you and I, we, are being called to stretch, to open our arms along the margins of this broken world and find the delight and the life God provides for us there.

Where everything changes—and we have the eyes to see a miraculous God who coaxes beauty out of life's pain, and redemption from our grossest injustices.

God is calling us, Grace Covenant, to give ourselves to a most unusual and unlikely sacred crossroads. Jesus uses risk to connect, to heal, and to change lives.

Risky business, indeed. Risky business, indeed.

Thanks be to God.

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<sup>1</sup> For more about the story of Carville, Ella Bounds, and Neil White see White's book on his time at Carville, *In the Sanctuary of Outcasts: A Memoir* (Harper Collins).