

## Sermon by the Rev. Christopher D. Girata

Luke 5:1-11  
(Epiphany 5 – Year C)  
7 February 2010

Just over 150 years ago, a man by the name of Charles Blondin, also known as *The Great Blondin*, accomplished an amazing feat. Blondin was the first person to cross Niagara Falls on a tightrope. At 5pm on a Thursday evening in the summer of 1859, Blondin stepped onto the 3-inch-wide tightrope and started his long descent down the 1,100-ft. cable, which, at midpoint, sank fifty feet below its starting height. When Blondin reached the middle, he stopped and lowered an empty bottle tied to a piece of twine into the water below. He hauled up some Niagara River water, drank it, and resumed his journey, uphill this time, to the other side. His first crossing took more than 20 minutes, but he arrived safely on the other side triumphant, though bathed in sweat. He rested briefly, accepted a glass of champagne from members of the crowd that had gathered to watch his amazing spectacle and, after performing a little dance on the rope, Blondin walked back across – this time in just eight minutes.

For many weeks following, Blondin continued to cross the falls, each time adding a new twist. He crossed the falls while doing a backwards somersault, he crossed while blindfolded, he crossed while pushing a wheelbarrow, he crossed on stilts, he crossed in the dark while Roman candles flared from the ends of his balancing pole, and once, he even stopped half way across the rope and cooked an omelet on a portable stove!

Now to be completely honest, the appeal of the event rested on the crowd's secret delight in the possibility that Blondin could, at any moment, fall. With that in mind, the most dramatic moment of Blondin's story came one day at the end of the summer when Blondin decided to try his most dangerous trick. He turned toward the crowd that had watched for days and asked, "Do you believe I can carry someone across the rope on my back?" The crowd excitedly roared its approval, "Yes!" "In that case," Blondin said, "Who will volunteer?" The crowd was immediately silent. Blondin pointed to a man standing nearby and asked him if he would volunteer to ride on his back. The man replied, "Hardly! Do you think I'd risk my life while you carried me on your back?!" Blondin continued to point at the men standing nearest to him, saying "How about you?" Even though they had watched Blondin cross the falls successfully countless times, one by one, the men declined. Some even turned and walked away.

Finally, Blondin pointed to a plain-looking man who stood off to the side and asked, “Do you believe you can cross the falls safely on my back?” The man replied, “I believe I can. In fact, I have no doubt at all.” Blondin said, “Will you trust me?” The man replied, “Yes!” Then the man climbed on the back of Charles Blondin and they headed out across the falls.<sup>1</sup>

The story of Charles Blondin reminds us that taking risks is risky. Taking risks means that we make the conscious choice to let go of the control we think we hold on our lives. Sometimes the risk can be big, and sometimes the risk can be small. Deciding to risk something means that we have intentionally placed faith in something outside ourselves. There are emotional risks, like in a friendship or in a marriage when we must decide to risk being hurt in order for the relationship to grow. Then there are physical risks, like when we get on a plane or take a ride in someone’s car. In either case we risk injury if the person in charge takes their hands off the controls or takes their eyes off the road.

Then there are spiritual risks, like when we made the decision to be here tonight rather than somewhere else watching the Super Bowl... Or like when a man in that Niagara Falls crowd climbed on the back of Charles Blondin. Or like when Peter, after a terribly disappointing day of fishing, sees that there is something transcendent about this strange man named Jesus, and leaves the only world he knows to follow him.

The scene we hear recounted in today’s gospel lesson is one of the most challenging in all of Scripture. Jesus tells Peter to do something totally illogical. Jesus tells Peter to go back out in his boat, even after an exhausting and disappointing night of fishing, and fish some more. To his surprise, Peter is overwhelmed by a huge catch, and he knows that Jesus is something special. Yet even after Jesus proves that he’s not just another guy walking down the beach, Peter’s first reaction is fear – *[Peter] fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.”* Peter has come face to face with something that he cannot begin to understand, and perhaps he’d like to run away, but he’s a fisherman who just caught a boat-load of fish! Instead, Peter begs Jesus to leave them alone. Peter wants Jesus to take whatever power he has to some other place, to some other person.

But Jesus stands firm, saying “Do not be afraid.” Jesus knows that Peter is frightened at the miraculous display and doesn’t want Peter to misunderstand the huge catch of fish. Jesus wants to make sure that Peter doesn’t think that this wildly successful catch of fish is all there is. Instead, Jesus moves right on to his real point: Jesus has a risky proposition for Peter. Peter, still overwhelmed by the tangible reality of the huge catch of fish is offered an even greater opportunity. Jesus says, “From now on you will be

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from *Taking Risks & Inspiring Faith: Story of the Great Blondin*, by Annie Hart.

catching people.” I imagine that Peter, still kneeling in front of Jesus, slowly looked up into Jesus’ eyes. Peter, still filled with fear, looked into the eyes of Jesus and knew he was telling the truth. Peter saw in Jesus’ eyes something true, something more than the reality he knew. Peter felt, in his gut, that he was, indeed, destined for more than catching fish. Peter knew he was witnessing the start of something that would change the world. *When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.*

Peter witnessed the power of the Holy Spirit and the Spirit changed him forever. When the Holy Spirit works in the world, we can be scared, we can be filled with fear. We are naturally averse to things that we don’t understand, yet through Jesus Christ our God invites us to respond to the Spirit with calm and courage. We are told not to fear what we cannot understand, we are told to trust our hearts. We are told to open the eyes of our hearts and see beyond the tangible realities of what surrounds us and to see what can be. We are invited to be one with God and do what we are gifted to do – and in doing so, we change the world!

Which brings me back to the story of Charles Blondin: As Blondin stepped onto the rope with the man on his back, the crowd looked on and waited breathlessly while they crossed over the roaring falls. The risk was great – at any moment, the men could fall. Yet Blondin put one foot in front of the other, carrying his rider all the way, and stepped onto the other side. Small whispers from the crowd grew into deafening cheers. The risk paid off. The man saw an opportunity and was courageous enough to take it. He risked his life to truly live.

The Holy Spirit wants to work in all our lives – and that is risky! The Holy Spirit wants to move in us and change us forever so we can change the world forever. All we have to do is take the risk. All we have to do is trust our hearts and say, “Yes!” The risk will pay off.

Amen.