

Your God is Too Safe

Rich Nathan

October 3-4, 2015

Your God Is Too...Series

Matthew 14.22-33

Have you ever done something that pushed you WAY out of your comfort zone? In other words, have you ever taken a risk that really threatened your finances or your career or maybe even your physical safety in a big time way?

I've never been a fan of heights. My dad was a roofer and as a teenager I helped my dad in New York put on shingle roofs on lots of our Saturdays. I was primarily the shingle and tar paper carrier. So I would carry a half bundle of shingles on my right shoulder and cling to the ladder for dear life with my left hand – up two stories, down two stories. Then when all the shingles were on top of the roof, I would have to get off the ladder and help him nail the shingles down. I really don't like heights.

In college a few guys in my dorm said, "Hey, Rich, we're all going sky-diving this weekend. Want to come?" Now, I've heard of temporary insanity, but up until that moment, I don't know if I personally ever experienced it. But I heard myself say, "Sure! Sounds like fun!" Sounds like fun? Sounds like death! Sounds like a root canal on my whole body without Novocain. But I said, "Sure, sounds like fun."

So Saturday morning we piled into a car and drove way east of Cleveland to this sky-diving school. Our teacher, if I can call him that, was an older guy with very few teeth. His extensive training involved us getting up on a wooden platform which was 4' high and then we'd jump into this beach sand and roll. I think we did that 3-4 times when with his one good eye he judged us ready to jump out of a plane.

The 6-7 of us toddled off to the plane with our parachutes strapped on our backs and our reserve chutes around our stomachs. The plane was a WWII vintage plane. We got in the back with our parachutes and before the plane took off our instructor said, "Listen, once the plane is up in the air, you're all getting out – either voluntarily or I'm going to throw you out. Just remember, everyone jumps!"

There we were, in the plane, flying at about 5000 feet, a mile above the ground. The rest of the guys were saying really encouraging things like, "We're all going to die." "We're doomed." "Why did we decide to do this?" "We're all going to die!" You know, positive things like that. Our instructor ordered the first guy into the door. We were on a static line and so the chute

was pulled when you jumped. There was a little place below the door for you to put your left foot. And with your right arm you were to throw yourself out onto the wing and then jump off.

The plane was going forward maybe 80 mph, I don't remember. But the first guy was a big guy. He was really wide. And the moment that he put his arm out, he was like a kite and was blown back. You could just see him blown off the wing of the plane. I was #2. I got up, I put my foot under the door, and I threw my arm out. Being much smaller, I was just hanging on for dear life. Finally, the instructor said, "Jump!" and I leapt off into the Twilight Zone! I couldn't hear anything. I couldn't see anything until my chute opened. It was actually a very nice ride down. The chance that if there was a problem I could have pulled my reserve chute and saved myself was exactly zero.

Suffice it to say, I never did that again.

Frank Farley is a psychologist at Temple University who spent much of his career studying what he labeled the T-Type thrill seeking personality. The T-Type personality is the kind of person who loves taking risks, who seeks stimulation, who seeks excitement, who seeks thrills in life. There is obviously a continuum. On one side you have the T-Type personality, the person who is base jumping and hang-gliding, the folks who are free climbing up the granite face of El Capitan, 3000 ft straight up without any ropes. So, on one side you have folks like that – the bungee cord jumpers, the folks who are kayaking the Colorado River, the people who stand up in rollercoasters because the ride isn't thrilling enough on its own.

And you have a spectrum of personalities. What if you don't have a T-Type personality? What if you prefer to wear your pants not just with a belt, but with suspenders, just in case? What if you always hold the handrail even when you are descending down 2-3 steps? What if you are not the thrill-seeking child walking on top of the swing set to see if you could make it across without falling? What if you were the child who was holding your mother's hand while you sat on the park bench thinking, "That looks really dangerous. I'm glad that's not me up there."

Do you know that God calls all of us, even non-T-Type people to push way out of our comfort zones, to risk, to do something that might appear pretty foolish to the benchwarmers and the risk-avoiders? I've been doing a series this fall titled "Your God is Too..." I've been talking about all of the distorted reduced views of God that keep us from really loving God, or enjoying his presence, or experience him in a real way. This series is all about what keeps us from experiencing more of God. Today I want to talk about a God who calls every one of us out of our comfort zones – those with T-Type personalities and those who are totally on the other side, who by way of temperament, personality, training and upbringing are really careful about everything. Today I want to talk about a God who calls every one of us, whatever our personalities and temperaments out of our comfort zones to know the thrill of risking, the exhilaration of going beyond our own limits. What it feels like to depend on God alone. I've called today's message "Your God is Too Safe." Let's pray.

Matthew 14:22–33 (NIV)

22 Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. 23 After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, 24 and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

25 Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. 26 When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost,” they said, and cried out in fear.

27 But Jesus immediately said to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

28 “Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.”

29 “Come,” he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus.

30 But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!”

31 Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?”

32 And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. 33 Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

Historically, the United States has been a nation of risk-takers. The people who wanted to play it safe stayed in the Old Country. It was the risk-takers who left their homes and villages, left their families and ventured across the ocean trusting their lives to a very uncertain fate. It was the risk-takers who filled Independence Hall in Philadelphia in 1776 to declare independence and essentially to declare war on the most powerful nation in the world. It was the risk-takers who pushed away from their homes and villages on the east coast and ventured west. It was the risk-takers who invented the machines and started businesses and cleared land that provided for them when they got to Ohio and the Great Plains and the far West.

Now we’ve become a nation of risk-averse people. You read about the Maryland couple who were charged with neglect for allowing their 2 children, age 10 and 6, to play outside and to walk home by themselves, even though statistically there are no more stranger abductions of children than when I was a child. We parent our kids today so differently than the WWII generation parented those of us who are Baby Boomers. We supervise every activity of our kids. We’ve torn up all the playground equipment. There are no more see-saws or monkey bars. Every playground has a rubberized surface with padding everywhere. Ladders have way more warnings on them than they do rungs. Every medication you take comes with a manual warning you of the horrible things that could happen to you, if you actually swallow that pill.

We have become a risk-averse nation. And we carry this risk-aversion into our relationship with God. No wonder so many people find Christianity so boring. No wonder even church-goers find their thrills elsewhere, sometimes with things that are licit, sometimes with things that are illicit. It is because our God is too safe, because our God is too predictable.

Follow me for just a moment on this little thought experiment. What if following Christ became thrilling, exhilarating, something that regularly pulled us out of our comfort zones? What if following Christ made our hearts race, made the hairs on our necks stand up a little? What if following Christ was not always safe and predictable and completely subject to our control, but was sometimes unreasonable, a bit dangerous, something that would make our professional colleagues shake their heads and say, “Well, that may be a drop foolish to do at your age, or in your circumstances.”

Now this text is so rich with spiritual lessons. For example, in vv. 22-23,

Matthew 14:22–23 (NIV)

22 Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. 23 After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone,

...Jesus withdraws from everyone. He withdraws from the crowds and the disciples in order to be alone with God the Father. What we see modeled regularly in the life of Jesus is the importance of solitude, the importance of alone time with God. Being alone with God was a spiritual priority for Jesus. It was solitude with God that gave Jesus a spiritual center. He wasn't always driven by the demands of the crowd. He wasn't just an echo of everyone else's opinion. He had spiritual center so that he wasn't simply reacting to circumstances and pressures, going up and down. He was able to find joy in the midst of great difficulty. Jesus was able to find peace when everyone else was freaking out.

There is another spiritual lesson in v. 24:

Matthew 14:24 (NIV)

24 and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

This is a picture of life in the real world. We live with the myth in America that if God loves us everything should be easy. But here in this story we read of people that Jesus loved, who experienced life in the real world, not in our American fantasy. What we discover, and most people around the world know this, is that life in the real world means constantly living with the wind in your face. Life in the real world is running against the wind. Life in the real world feels like pedaling your bike against the wind. Life in the real world is not sledding downhill all of the time. It is more like what I used to do with my kids in the winter and that I now do with my grandchildren. When my kids were small, I would sled downhill with them on my back for about a minute and a half. And then I would carry one, or both of them, along with the sled up the hill for the next 15 minutes with the wind in my face.

Are there any of you today slogging through life against the wind, feeling the exhaustion and pressure of the wind in your face with your family, in your finances, at your job, in school, in a relationship? That's normal life, friends, even though Jesus loves you.

But I want to focus our attention on vv. 25-32 where Peter, one of Jesus' disciples discovered for himself the thrill of following Jesus. Peter took a risk. He pushed out of his comfort zone and he became a water-walker. Just like I can say, "At least one time in my life, I actually jumped out of a plane. I experienced the thrill." For the rest of Peter's life, he could say, "One time through faith in Christ I walked on water." Can you say that? Wouldn't it have been cool just to have watched Peter climb out of the boat and watch the water becoming solid as he walked step by step towards Jesus? Even better, wouldn't it have been incredible to be Peter, to know the thrill, the exhilaration of one time in your life, just once, going beyond your human limits feeling what it feels like when you experience what God alone can do through you? What you know you couldn't possibly accomplish on your own? Wouldn't you like to walk on water?

Or at least one time in your life see a real miracle, or perform a dramatic healing, or lead someone to Christ, or participate in something that goes so far beyond your capacities? Wouldn't you like to be involved in something that thrills you down to your toes? We don't need some manufactured thrills to get our hearts pumping. Rather we need to know without a shadow of a doubt that the thing that we've been involved in only happened, only worked because God showed up. That only God could do this through you.

There is nothing that is as thrilling as knowing that you are being used by God. Nothing in this world compares to that. So, assuming that you are like the rest of humanity, that you would like a little bit of excitement in your life, you'd like some fun, some zip, you want to walk on water, if you want to experience a faith that is not just predictable and boring and filled with religious jargon and tastes like Coke without the fizz, if you want to have a relationship with God that thrills you, here are four questions you can ask yourself.

What's your boat?

Matthew 14:25–29 (NIV)

25 Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. 26 When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear.

27 But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

28 "Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water."

29 "Come," he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus.

Pastor John Ortberg, who is a great writer and communicator, wrote a wonderful book about 15 years ago titled If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat.

Cover Photo of If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat by John Ortberg

Here is what John Ortberg wrote:

I believe there is something – Someone – inside us who tells us there is more to life than sitting in the boat. You were made for something more than merely avoiding failure. There is something inside you that wants to walk on water – to leave the comfort of routine existence and abandon yourself to the high adventure of following God.

*So let me ask you a very important question: **what's your boat?***

Your boat is whatever represents safety and security to you apart from God himself. Your boat is whatever you're tempted to put your trust in, especially when life gets a little stormy. Your boat is whatever keeps you so comfortable that you don't want to give it up even if it is keeping you from joining Jesus on the waves. Your boat is whatever pulls you away from the high adventure of extreme discipleship.

The boat is different for each of us. For many of you, your boat is financial security. You have a gnawing feeling that God may be calling you to ministry, to missions, or to work for a non-profit, to do something that really makes a difference. But the thought of stepping out of that boat, risking financial security scares you to death. As long as you sit in the boat, you will never experience the thrill of water-walking or what God might do with your life, if you just let him, and turn control of your life over to him.

For some of you, your boat may be your parent's approval, particularly if you were raised in a more traditional family, or in a more traditional culture. You may not even agree with your parents, your dad or your mom, about things that they think are important. You may not even share all of their values. But you desperately want their approval for all of your choices, so you sit in your boat instead of stepping out and fully experiencing what God might do with your life, if you just trusted him.

For some of you, your boat is your job, or your major in college. The funny thing is that you may hate your job, or hate your major, but you are so afraid of stepping out and leaving the security of a job you hate, or a major that promises to give you a job at the end of the road even though you can't imagine spending your life in that particular field; it's just that you don't want to take the risk of pursuing something else, something that brings more joy, more fulfillment, more peace into your life.

For some of you, your boat is a relationship. You are involved with a man or woman who you see has some obvious problems. There are some red flags that you are aware of in their work habits, in the way they treat you, with an addiction, or they are perfectly nice people, but you

just don't love them. But they are your boat. And the thought of being alone frightens you so much that you settle. You are afraid you won't find anyone better.

And for some of you, your boat is what other people's opinions are. You've thought about turning control of your life over to Christ, but then you worry, "What would my family think?" Or "What would my friends think?" Or "What would my boyfriend or girlfriend think?" And so you stay seated in your boat and never take the radical step of surrendering your life to Christ.

Friends, do you know what your boat is? Do you know what represents safety and security to you apart from God himself? Are you aware of what keeps you from venturing out and prevents you from discovering the thrill and excitement of following Jesus Christ? Sitting in the boat is the reason why the Christian life is so dull and boring and predictable for so many of us.

John Ortberg put it so well.

If you want to walk on water, you've got to get out of the boat.

Here is the second question for any potential water-walker.

Can you avoid risks?

Assuming that you are a non-T-Type personality, that like most folks you are not jumping out of planes or hang-gliding or bungee jumping, can we really arrange our lives in such a way that we avoid all risks?

Picture of Lightening

Lightening kills 10,000 people annually.

Picture of a tornado

Tornadoes kill 60 people annually.

Picture of airplane

Airplanes kills 1200 people annually.

Picture of a hippo

Hippos kill 2900 people annually.

You say, "I'm going to avoid big animals like hippos."

Picture of Ants

Ants kill 30 people annually.

You say, "I'm just going to stay inside. All of this death and destruction happens out there."

Picture of Vending Machines

Vending machines kill 13 people annually.

I assume that the deaths occurred not from eating the garbage that is sold in vending machines. I mean is it really wise to eat a tuna salad sandwich or sausage sandwich that is sold in a vending machine? Do you really need a honey bun that's wrapped in plastic and has who knows how many pounds of preservatives in order to keep the honey bun soft? I presume that the 13 annual deaths from vending machines are not from eating the food in the machines, I presume it is because the person was jiggling the vending machine because they can't get the tuna salad or honey bun out and so they shake the vending machine until it falls on them.

And so non-T-Type people say, "Well, then, I'm never leaving my house. That's it."

Picture of bathtub

Bathtubs kills 340 people annually.

Do you say, "That's settled. I'm not getting out of bed."

Well, I've got bad news for you.

Picture of Bed

Falling out of bed kills 450 people annually in the US

Life in this uncertain broken world is inherently risky. John Wimber, who was the founder of the Vineyard movement, was responsible for launching the Vineyard movement around the world. John Wimber's most famous statement was this:

Faith is spelled R.I.S.K.

Part of the reason that John Wimber saw so many healings and such spectacular results in his ministry is that he simply refused to let fear determine what God could do through his life.

Jesus once told a story of a man who tried to live a risk-free life. In Jesus' story found in Matthew 25, one man was given 5 talents, another 2 talents, and the third man was given 1 talent. We don't know what the talents were symbolically. It might have been a certain amount of money. It may have been certain opportunities. It may have been certain gifts or life experiences. But whatever those talents were, the man given the five talents risked them. He invested them. He threw all of his chips out on the table and bet it all. And he doubled his investment. The man who was given two talents also risked them. He pushed all of his chips out on the table; he bet his life on God and doubled his investment. But the man who was given one talent was afraid. He played his cards close to the vest. He held onto his chip. He was so afraid of losing; he so much wanted to live a risk-free life that he never allowed himself

to be completely spent for God. He never knew the thrill of just hanging out there allowing himself to be used by God. And in the end, he lost it all.

Friends, is there any talent that you have, any gift, any life experience, anything that God has done in your life that you are burying just because you want to play it safe?

You know the reason that we can take risks in this world is because Jesus has taken away eternal risk from us. If you put your trust in Jesus, if you believe on him and entrust your life to him, all eternal risk is taken away. The Apostle Paul writes this in Romans 8.1:

Romans 8:1 (NIV)

8 Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,

And then he ends the chapter this way in Romans 8.38-39:

Romans 8:38–39 (NIV)

38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Friends, if the worst thing happened and we ended up dying, those of us who have entrusted our lives to Christ will live with him forever. And it is because of Jesus' staggering promises to us of no eternal risk for his followers that we are free to take risks in this world. No matter what comes our way, if our worst fears come upon us, nothing can ever separate you or me from the love of Christ. And when you know that you are secure in God's love that nothing can ever separate you from the Lord, then you are free to take radical, edgy, out-of-your-comfort-zone risks.

You want to be a water-walker? What's your boat? Can you really avoid all risks? Here is the third question:

Are you called?

There are lots of people who are inclined to jump out of the boat, but it is just foolishness, not followership of Christ. "I'm going to blow up my career, and God will take care of me." "I'm going to do something great for God and so I'm going to think about the most outrageous thing I can possibly do and do that." I love Peter's statement in v. 28:

Matthew 14:28 (NIV)

28 "Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water."

Before we rush out of the boat, we need to find out if this is you, Jesus. Are you the one telling me to step out? Sometimes the risk that God is calling us to is staying where we are. I especially want to speak to any of you young adults. We live in a society that calls us to constantly chase the latest and greatest. Everyone is taking a selfie while leaning over a bridge. What if, instead of racing around the country jumping from church to church and job to job and relationship to relationship, because God will surely do a miracle through you if you are over there instead of staying over here, what if digging in and doing the really hard work of deepening relationship, of growing where you're planted, of keeping your commitments; what if taking a risk for you meant doing the really scary thing – staying put and letting God use you where you are?

All of this risk-taking turns on what is God saying to us? Are you called? Jesus, is it you?

Let me tell you a story of a woman in our congregation. A couple of decades ago a woman named Deb Petermann

Picture of Deb Petermann

...who was a fairly new follower of Jesus was attending Vineyard Columbus. She was married to a good man named, Doug, and was taking care of her two little girls. She was one of those women who would run around and jump from thing to thing wanting to do something great for God. But in her own words she kept burning out. Finally, she prayed, "What do YOU want me to do, Lord?" She said that God showed her a picture of her brother, who had special needs, in a Sunday School class. Deb said to God, "No way, Lord. I am done with mental retardation. I grew up with that in my family. Pick something else."

She used to take her daughters to different playgrounds and she kept meeting families who had children with special needs. She knew that our church wasn't ready to have families like that here. So she said, "God, I want to do something for you. What do you want me to do?" The picture that kept coming to mind was of her brother sitting in a Sunday School class. When Deb was growing up, her brother never sat in a Sunday School class because there was no room for a special needs child. And so her parents and her brother stopped going to church because of his behavior.

Finally, getting this picture of her brother sitting in a Sunday School class over and over, Deb said, "OK, Lord, if this is really you, if this is really you, then you've got to provide me with curriculum that's geared toward children with developmental disabilities." A few days later she went to her foot doctor. She was sitting up on a table with her shoes and socks off. She picked up a Christian magazine and there was an article titled:

"Under His Wings – How To Teach Multi-Handicapped Children About God"

Sitting on that table alone in her doctor's office with her shoes off, Deb said "yes" to God, yes to getting out of the boat. So 20 years ago she started Bridge Builders Ministry here at Vineyard Columbus with 2 children. In those days there wasn't a lot of how-to's, but the Lord kept guiding her along the way. God led Deb to a career as a Church Relations Program Manager with Joni and Friends. She began helping lots of other churches in Ohio and surrounding states to learn how to include people with disabilities in their churches so there wouldn't be another family like hers who said, "Enough with church. They have no room for someone like my child at that church."

What's God calling you to? What's God speaking to you about when you quiet your heart?

Here is the fourth question for would-be water-walkers, those who want to live on the edge, who want some thrill in your life.

Where's your focus?

Matthew 14:30–31 (NIV)

30 But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!"

31 Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?"

At the beginning I imagine Peter's eyes were locked onto the Lord. He wasn't looking at his feet. He was just saying to himself, "Just keep looking at Jesus." Just keep looking at Jesus. And he believed the sacred truth that I've taught you over and over, left foot, right foot, left foot.

But then something happened. He took his eyes off Jesus and he focused on the high waves around him. When he saw the size of the waves and the wind, he began to be frightened. His faith wavered. We can start off with the best intentions. Yes, Lord, I'm going to get out of the boat and risk. I know it's you calling me. I've had this confirmed by other mature Christians. It's you. But just because we're called doesn't mean the walk is going to be easy. Our faith is often tested after we take a few steps. When you're risking for God, the issue is not how big are the problems facing us, the issue is always how big is our Jesus? The issue is never how much am I capable of accomplishing. The issue is always what could Christ accomplish through me, if I'm obeying his call and I'm surrendered to his will?

Friends, there is nothing more thrilling than seeing Christ work through you in ways that go beyond what you could ever humanly on your own accomplish. Get out of the boat. Take a risk. Discover what it's like to really walk with Christ. Let's pray.

Your God is Too Safe

Rich Nathan

October 3-4, 2015

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