

St. Mark's, Niagara-on-the-Lake
The Fifth Sunday in Lent, year 'C'
3 April 2022
The Rev'd Leighton Lee

There's something about churches and books—as we know all too well in this parish. But we're not unusual. In 1978 there was an auction at Christie's Park Avenue galleries in New York at which my alma mater, General Seminary, sold a Gutenberg Bible for \$2,000,000. At the time this was the highest price ever paid for a rare book. The New York Times published an article about the sale which said,

Not only was this copy neither read nor studied by scholars, it was also difficult to even look at in recent years ... The book had been locked up in a vault for security reasons and placed on view under guard from time to time. "The money from its sale can be put to far better use," a spokesman for the institution said.

By the time I arrived as a student some twenty-odd years later, the sale had passed into seminary lore, and it was not uncommon to hear people say that it had been a mistake, that the trustees had been precipitous, that they should have used the threat of selling this priceless asset as a way of wresting money from the Episcopal elite of Manhattan. To make matters worse, the school was now facing a real financial crisis and the proceeds from the sale had been spent—and probably wasted.

Thirty-five years later, a new world record for the highest price ever paid at auction for a book was set at Sotheby's in New York on November 26, 2013: \$14,165,000. The book in question was one of only eleven surviving volumes of The Bay Psalm Book, which was the first book printed in North America. The consignor was Old South Church in Boston which had decided, amid great controversy, to sell this priceless asset so that the mission, ministry, and outreach of the church could continue despite dwindling attendance and congregational giving. You won't be surprised to hear that the plan had several detractors who managed for a long time to embroil the church in controversy. The money, they claimed, wouldn't be used for noble purposes and a great piece of the church's patrimony would be forever lost.

Well, what's it to be?—preserve patrimony or take a chance on extravagance? The first strategy is, admittedly, safer. But are we called, either as individuals or an institution, to safety? Doesn't everything involve some measure of risk? That's what we're all struggling with right now in the face of the easing of restrictions, mask mandates and the like. But one thing has become clear: we can't stay hermetically sealed away from the world forever.

Now, if you want to keep your life safe and secure, and never risk it, never spend it, never give it away, if you want to keep it locked up all to yourself in an emotional safety-deposit box, you can. You *can* do these things, but if you do, eventually it will

dry up and disappear like a bit of dust. If, however, you are willing to let it go, to lose it, to involve it in the great issues of life, and both spend and give it extravagantly, you may lose it altogether—in one sense. But the miracle is that you will find another life—another kind of life—as different as the plant is different from the seed: fuller, richer, more beautiful, and brimming with creative possibility.

In his book *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, Richard Rohr describes two phases of life. In the first, we are concerned with establishing ourselves by achieving and competing and performing. During this time, we work hard, and try to make a name for ourselves, and start a family and so forth. It's a time of competition in which we make measured and sensible and cautious decisions. The second half, he says, comes when we embark on a different journey, one that involves challenges, mistakes, loss of control, and even suffering. Only those who can understand the meaning of their failings, of their "falling down," can ever hope to rise again, to "fall upward." Rohr puts it this way: We have to fall through our lives into our lives.

In order to really live, to deepen our spirituality and understand the meaning of our lives—the lives God is calling us to embrace—we need to have some things go wrong. That's a difficult teaching to accept; all of us are risk-averse, and our tendency is not to do anything—or at least not anything very daring and risky. But in order to truly *live*, we need to be willing to take a chance, to experience failure and disappointment—and, yes, loss. We need to be willing to spend everything *now* in the present moment, trusting that in so doing we *are* in fact planning for the future.

Life is a gift, a wondrous, deep and mysterious gift, whose true meaning is waiting to be discovered by each of us. But in order to discover this true meaning, we need to spend it without knowing how—or if—our investment will be returned. We need to risk it on joy, even though we may discover only sorrow. We need to die to who we think we are, what we think we want, and which road we wish to travel, if we are to be alive to the meaning of our lives.

"The world breaks everyone," Hemingway wrote at the end of *A Farewell to Arms*, "then some become strong at the broken places." How many people have we met who are so fearful of the future that they are paralyzed in the present? I daresay there are many of us for whom the same could be true. They aren't bad people, nor are they unremittably dour people; neither are their lives completely grey. But being risk-averse doesn't serve them in the end since it makes them so afraid to fall that they never get up. They never become strong, or alive, at the broken places of their disillusion and uncertainty.

Part of us, the part of us that lives forever on the border of the first stage of life, is deeply troubled by the likelihood of experiencing setbacks and regrets, and longs to be safe and secure. But another part of us, the part that pays attention to the holy longing within, to the desire to have a deeper and richer and truer experience, yearns to spend and be spent, to risk it all, knowing that when we do, we find our true selves. That true self knows that if we lose it all in the risk of love, even that loss can be

redeemed by the One who, when the world broke him, became so strong at the broken places of his wounds that by them he gives to you, and to me, and to all people, the glorious gift of new life—a life that is too precious, short and wondrous to be shut away and never spent.