

A little over seven and a half years ago, I started talking to the search committee here about maybe -- *maybe* -- being interested in putting my name in the hat to be your priest. I did not particularly want to do it. But by that point, I'd been through a lot of interviews and nothing had been terribly exciting. Most of the places I applied felt kinda safe. Like, familiar was what I wanted. It wasn't until I didn't get picked by several familiar churches in Arkansas that I looked at riskier possibilities. I don't mean risky in the sense of being all that dangerous. Risky like going to a new restaurant is risky. I mean, what if it's not good? Or the servers are mean or, worse yet, what if you love it and have to change all your date night plans for ever after?

So, I started applying much farther afield. There was the little bitty church right on the edge of Yellowstone. Their search committee couldn't believe anyone would be interested in them, which was sad in its own right, but when I said I love small places and it didn't hurt that Yellowstone was their backyard neighbor, they looked surprised. Yellowstone was so familiar to them, they didn't understand how it could be a draw.

Another spot was in Mexico, which looked amazing. It was a full-time gig in an ex-pat community surrounded by rural Mexican life. It seemed like a cool way to do my work and practice Spanish anytime I'd venture beyond the parish bounds. They wanted me to know that most of their people were retirees. They *really* wanted me to know that. I got the impression that they just wanted to enjoy paradise and check in on the church from time to time. That's fine, I suppose, but it wasn't for me.

Another spot was Switzerland. Geneva, to be precise, who I interviewed with the week after I interviewed in-person here. But I'll come back to them, 'cause you need to hear about Hamilton first. I did not want to come up here. I was nervous about a lot of things, but mostly I still had this anti-Yankee sentiment the South is so good at indoctrinating its sons with. I've always been a Southerner. Birth has a way of putting you in clubs you didn't ask for, but I was proud of where I grew up. And while I was aware of the South's past and absolutely did not want to get lumped in with all of that, I still wore my Southern heritage with pride. And, though I'd lived all over the world by then, I'd never lived north of the Mason-Dixon, and for reasons I'm not entirely sure I understand, the prospect of crossing that line for anything more than a vacation made me itchy. I couldn't imagine being good enough for fancy Yankee types, and there's a college so that's intimidating, and winter is a thing. And the more I looked at my application, the more I stewed, and the less I wanted to hit "Send." But I did, mostly to make Becca happy.

Sidebar: My wife Becca is amazing. It should come as no surprise that she was right in her long-distance matchmaking efforts, but I couldn't get there. This was a venture I really didn't want to entertain. 'Cause what if it ended up being awful? And what if the scary thing was actually nice? Or worse yet, what if I loved it? Well, I did love it. The folks I met were amazing, and the church was amazing, the town was amazing, and Becca and I flew home hoping to hear back from y'all soon. But the day after we landed, I had my skype interview with that church in Geneva, Switzerland. I had been so excited for that interview for so long, and it was ... y'all, it was awful. By the time it finished, I'm sure they had quite the debrief about that lame priest from Arkansas. Y'all, it was bad. Not them, they were great. Their search committee was made up of people from all parts of the globe. They talked about amazing programs and new ministries and ways their church wove itself into the fabric of Swiss life in the big city. Where the folks by Yellowstone or in Mexico weren't sure why anyone would give them a look, Geneva had piles of rejected applications and knew they were cool. So when the interview started and they asked a softball question to get things rolling, both they and I were surprised by my answer. The question was, "So, what makes you interested in living in Geneva?" That should've been the easiest question

ever asked in the history of humanity. Should've been. But when I tried to answer, my mouth went its own way and words fell out, but in my head it immediately became clear what I actually wanted.

As cool as it would've been, I didn't want Geneva. And I didn't want any of the other places I'd looked at. I wanted Hamilton, and I didn't know just how badly I did want Hamilton until the folks in Geneva asked their softball question. That was the high point of the interview, by the way. It only got worse from there. I have never tanked anything so badly, and the looks on their faces showed just how badly they were ready for the call to end. And it was just a day or two later that I got the amazing call from up here. It all felt very "nothing ventured, nothing gained." If it hadn't been for Becca's insistence or my weird experiences with other churches or Geneva asking such an easy question, who knows? But it wasn't until I dropped my prejudices that the next steps materialized. I had a spiritual director in seminary that told me I had a habit I needed to break: I needed to get myself out of my own way, stop standing between me and the risks life needed me to take.

Now, if I read Jesus' parable as an economic treatise, it doesn't do much for me. The guy diversifies his investments, and he's responsible enough to choose different folks with different strategies, some riskier and some more conservative. And by the end of it, most of those investments returned phenomenal gains, and he still had a small pot of money reliably set aside in case all the other ventures hadn't gained. Pretty sound approach, actually. But I wonder how much of the story hinges on rate of return and how much hinges on the way the last guy delivers his news. I don't think most financial meetings should begin by telling your boss, "hey, I didn't do much with this 'cause you're kind of a jerk."

Also, if we're assuming this parable about money is actually a parable about money, then the ending gets extra messy. Those who have a lot will get more, and those who have little will get theirs taken away. And also thrown in jail. And also have an all-around real bad time. If scripture wants this to be how we handle money and those who have it, I don't love it. On the other hand, if this is just describing the ways of this world, it's pretty much on point. It's expensive being poor, and we all know the rich keep on getting richer and the poor keep on getting poorer.

But I don't think this parable's actually about money. I mean, maybe it is, but I get a whole lot more out of this if we're talking about ourselves. What do we do with opportunities that land on our plate? What are we willing to risk to make those things real? That can lead to some mighty big and scary risks. You might have to move to the middle of nowhere New York, hypothetically. You might have to give up the security you've worked hard to establish. You might even have to risk liking what you find. And I wonder what that means for us. Are we comfortable with where we are, and if so, could we risk that comfort? Maybe we don't need to. I mean, that little church in Mexico is doing just fine. And the one next to Yellowstone got their priest. And they're chugging along being their part of the Body of Christ. But they're staying small and waiting for miracles that may come, but I worry sometimes that they're so focused on waiting that they can't see opportunities for what they are.

St. Thomas', y'all took a gamble with me. And I kinda took a gamble with you. And it's worked out great. I got out of my own way and together we've ventured and gained and lost and gained again. Now if I had my druthers and all the energy in the world, we'd just keep on venturing and risking. I actually think that's a pretty good way to go about this Kingdom of God stuff. But also, I know we've been venturing and risking for a long time, and that's mighty tiring. So maybe it's time for us to find a little balance. We don't have to be the master's five-talent investment firm all the time. But not being that extreme doesn't mean we're automatically the one with a single uninvested talent either. There's a place in the middle where we can venture some, risk what needs risking, and still have space to rest a spell. Ventured and gained but not consumed.

I thank God and a fine search committee for bringing me here, and as much as I get a kick out of that Geneva interview, I'm glad I took the risks you and Becca and a lot of other folks pushed me toward that led me

here. I'm glad my spiritual director helped me get out of my own way. And I'm glad it's you I've gained. I don't have a clue where all of this venturing and breathing and balance takes us. We'll know what we've gained in time, but right now the untold possibilities hold everything. And that's a little scary and very risky and really cool. I'm glad it's you I get to venture with. I'm glad it's God we get to venture with. And even though it is scary and risky and cool, I can't wait to see what all these balanced ventures bring.