

GLORIA DEI - 2/3/08

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

One of the latest trends among the young is the growth of "extreme sports." Any sport, any activity, it seems, is better if taken to some new "extreme." Snowboarding is great; although, there are currently battles between skiers and boarders on the nation's slopes. Air-boarding (riding your snowboard down to earth after jumping out of an airplane) is extremely better. Mountain-biking, roller blading, skiing-everything is being taken to new, more daring extremes by Generation X'ers.

Of course, the only place that most of us ever see the performances of these "extreme athletes" is from the depths of our lounge chairs or recliners, safely parked in front of the TV. We watch these "crazy kids," shake our heads and preach about what ridiculous risks they are taking just to have fun.

But do you know who's really taking the biggest risks? The biggest risk takers are those of us who are winning the "couch-potato championships." While we just sit there watching "extreme athletes," our own blood pressure slowly rises; cholesterol starts piling up in our arteries; internalized stress mounts; our lungs take wimpy, inefficient breaths; and our muscle tone deteriorates. And all of that is on a good day.

Contrast that with the "extreme athlete." While apparently risking life and limb, the extreme athlete keeps his or her body fit, stress levels are lowered and there is that euphoric, endorphin rush that generally makes us feel good. In the long run, hurtling through the air may be less risky than sitting there in a chair.

The church, too, is increasingly being tempted to take a safe, armchair attitude. We are waking up to the fact that the secular society in the third millennium isn't only not church friendly; it isn't even church broken! In fact, the church as a witnessing body of Christ is finding itself undermined on nearly every economic and political front by people who claim the labels "conservative" and "liberal" alike. The church as the Body of Christ has been dismissed by society because we've generally "played it safe" by having a "let's-go-along-to-get-along" attitude. More and more Christians in the public square are finding themselves engaged in rear-guard apologetics instead of the front-line proclamation of God's reign. The vision that God has for the world is often squarely at odds with that of our society.

Why is it we feel we must somehow "protect" God from attacks launched by our culture? If God is so wimpy that the divine reputation is dependent upon an out-of-shape, overweight, soft-in-the-belly church for protection and defense, then we really are in trouble.

We Christians need to stop worrying about protecting God's good reputation and instead start taking a few risks for the sake of the gospel. Guess what? We really do have a big-enough God to deal with whatever human sinfulness may try to dish out.

___ We have a big-enough God to reach through the Internet.

___ We have a big-enough God to break through the cynicism of our world.

___ We have a big-enough God to push through the barriers of race, nation and culture.

___ We have a big-enough God to fly through the vastness of the universe.

___ We have a big-enough God to enter the expanding possibilities in science and medicine.

___ We have a big-enough God to change the future for girls in orphanages halfway around the world.

___ We have a big-enough God to work in the lives of people and communities and nations to overcome fear.

___ We have a big-enough God to transfigure lives today, reminding us that we are the children of God, and, if children, then fellow heirs with Jesus Christ in ministry, hope and glory.

Before the Transfiguration of our Lord, Matthew records the confession of Peter that Jesus was the Messiah, the Anointed One. When Peter made that confession, he took a genuine leap of faith, a genuine risk. He quit being an "armchair disciple," and for a brief moment became an airborne "extreme disciple" - risking everything for the thrill of claiming Jesus as Messiah totally and completely. But when Jesus followed Peter's big risk by revealing the God-sized risk he himself would undertake, Peter lost his nerve. It wouldn't be the last time for Peter to lose his nerve.

Peter had come to recognize Jesus as Messiah as a result of the "glory days" and good times of Jesus' Galilean ministry. Peter couldn't believe that this newly confessed Messiah

was "big enough" to embrace defeat and suffering and persecution, the torture and death that Jesus had predicted were to come. Peter thought he had to protect Jesus from this future, shield him from exposing the divine reputation to such a high-level risk. Despite his confession of faith, Peter's concept of the Messiah, his understanding of God's power and purpose, wasn't "big enough."

God took the biggest risk in all of history when God created men and women and gave us the freedom to choose or reject a relationship with our Creator. This divine risk was so huge that eventually it necessitated another God-ordained gamble- a crucified Christ. Jesus incarnated God's risk-taking love for humanity by offering us a new way back to the wholeness God intended for us.

The story of the Transfiguration is complete with symbolism and majesty and Epiphany. But it ends with Peter, James and John on the ground, filled with fear. This showing forth of God and Jesus being accompanied by Moses and Elijah in this mountaintop experience removed all doubt from these disciples' minds that what Jesus had said about his suffering would come true. They were in for a rocky ride. But in the midst of their fear, the instructive part of the story for each of us is that Jesus went to his disciples and said, "Stand up. Do not be afraid."

Peter's fears were real, but they were ridiculous. With God's help, Jesus was big enough to shoulder the cross, big enough to bear the suffering of the world, big enough to endure the scorn and rejection, big enough to accept the judgment of death. Jesus the Christ, Jesus the Messiah, was big enough to endure all this, to take this ultimate risk because he knew first-hand a God who was big enough- big enough to break through the hate with love, big enough to relieve the suffering forever, big enough to roll away the rock at the tomb's entrance, big enough to break the bonds of death itself and big enough to bring about the glory of the Resurrection.

Jesus' first formal lesson on discipleship taught that there was no risk we can take that is so great that it could ever separate us from God's redemption and God's love. Our greatest risk, Jesus cautioned, comes when we try to "play it safe" and avoid any risk-taking ventures- "those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

Jesus wants us to be "extreme Christians." The body of Christ must become the "extreme church." We have a big enough God, a big enough Savior, to handle whatever risks may emerge from our extreme behavior. We have a God who who risked loving us beyond all else. Is your God big enough to live in the extreme? Someone has said of our younger generation that they would rather be swallowed by a whale than nibbled to death by minnows. Our culture awaits a church that will love greatly, one that will risk losing itself in service, offering Christ to all with compassion and hope.

If we live in the extreme, we can expect problems. Our culture will whine. People focused on themselves will dismiss a covenant community that exists for others. It will require a big faith. Down along the Gulf of Mexico where many hurricanes strike, there is an old saying, "You can't get ready for a hurricane after the blow starts."

I want to close today with a story about a dairy farmer named Wesley Taylor. He lived in southwest Washington state and was trying to make a go of it as a dairyman following World War II. Times were hard. There were not enough workers available. He was shorthanded. He had to do all the milking, all of the farming, all of the repairing of fences and equipment. In short, he was failing fast. Then one day, a hulking, big-boned young fellow stopped by the dairy farm looking for work. The dairyman could scarcely believe his good fortune. Eagerly he asked the young man questions. Had he worked on a farm? Could he drive a tractor? Operate a hay baler? Milk cows? To each of these the young man nodded assent. Obviously, he was no talker. The dairyman pushed him with two or three more quick questions. The young man stood blinking his eyes, trying to form an answer. Finally, he blurted out, "Mister, I know how to sleep well on a windy night!" What a strange answer.

But the dairyman was desperate for help, so, despite his misgivings, he hired the young man. The newly hired man proved to be a steady worker who did his work well. The weeks stretched into months. The dairyman came to take his big, quiet hired hand for granted.

Then came the night of the big storm. The wind banged banged on the shutters; the rain fell in torrents on the windows; the great trees swayed and groaned. The dairyman, with an instinct for danger, awoke with a start. The storm was rising- a bad one. He lay in his bed for a

few minutes, listening for the sound of the hired man to come down from his attic bedroom to check things out. But inside the house, all was quiet.

The farmer waited a few minutes more. Then, in disgust, he arose, dressed quickly, and hurried upstairs. Through the closed door, he could hear the snoring of a contented sleeper.

"Well, I might as well go out myself," grumbled the dairyman. "He'd be too sleepy to know what he was doing." So, he pulled on his boots and his slicker got the flashlight and went out into the storm. He checked on the barn first. Every door secure. Then the milk shed. All doors were carefully bolted. The machine shed. In good shape. What about the big tarp over the stack of hay bales; surely by now that was blowing away. But no, the light revealed every weight in place. The hired man had even tied the tarp with extra ropes and stakes.

Suddenly, there in the darkness, the farmer stopped dead in his tracks. Why that fellow wasn't so dumb after all, even if he couldn't express himself so well. He had really been telling that he knew his job, and he could be trusted to do it well, when he had nodded his head so awkwardly and then blurted out, "I know how to sleep well on a windy night."

We have a God who is big enough to handle the storms in our lives so that we can sleep well on stormy nights. Trust that, believe that, and for that we say, "Thanks be to God." In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.