

“Hedging Our Bets”  
Based on Mark 9:30-37  
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Even if you have never been to casino and actually done it, you are probably familiar with the phrase, “Hedging your bets,” and may have actually practiced this fine, if dubious art, in some aspect of your life, maybe even spiritually. This idiosyncratic saying, this *dicho*, refers of course to the practice of placing a secondary bet in the gambling game of your choice, a bet with better odds of winning, but a lower payout, than your primary bet. For example, in the game of roulette, a game in which one places a bet on which numbered slot on a spinning wheel a little ball will land in, there are a variety of odds. If you place a bet that the ball will land on one particular number, the odds are 35:1, and if your number comes up, you win 35 times as much as you bet. However, you can also cover four numbers at once, and should the ball land on any one of those four numbers, you would win eight times as much as you bet. The more numbers you cover, the better your odds of winning, but also the lower the payday. You can even bet odds of two to one so that you have about a 50-50 chance of winning. “Hedging ones bets,” in this scenario, means that you place more than one bet on each spin of the wheel, such that even if you don’t win the big money, you may still win something and offset your losses. The Baptists in the room are getting a little nervous right now, wondering how I know all this, but all I can tell them is that with respect to

gambling, I rely on that marvelous Presbyterian perspective on temperance, “Everything in Moderation.”

The “hedge” bet is a secondary bet that is lost if the main bet is won. Thus, it is actually hoped that it is a losing proposition. Obviously, one would want to win the bet that had the greater yield. But just in case, to avoid breaking the bank, or to be able to stay and play longer, you hedge. Expert interpreters of oddsmaking see hedging as a two edged sword: it may keep you in the game a little longer, but it also cuts down on your potential profitability. Clearly, every dollar you bet that doesn’t win goes to the house. If you win the bigger, main bet, therefore, you lose all your hedge bets and the effective odds, and therefore your winnings, are actually lowered. As the the poet Sumner A. Ingmark, said: “When hedging bets, be apprehensive, Insurance schemes aren't inexpensive.” On the other hand, this same muse has said, “One school of thought alleges you're unwise betting hedges, But sometimes moderation has quite a firm foundation.”

In our Gospel reading tonight, I think the disciples are hedging their bets, their bets on Jesus. Each of them has invested quite a bit in following this sometimes hard to understand guy, and they are pretty sure there is a payoff, either a revolutionary one, or a spiritual one, or if they are lucky, both. They are risking quite a bit, for it is possible they may be seen as subversive threats to the status quo, and they have left behind family and work. But now for the second time, their fearless leader has confounded them with a bizarre prediction of his death, and

perhaps it felt like a run of bad luck at the roulette table that was going on a little too long. Suddenly their winnings seemed to be in jeopardy, and in the midst of their lack of comprehension both of what Jesus has meant by what he said, and the cost of hedging their bets, they lay down a few of their chips where the odds look like they are better: on themselves, and a succession plan. You know, just in case this Jesus thing doesn't work out like we hoped, maybe we can get out of this with something.

The text says that they were arguing about who was the greatest, and although there are many possibilities about what that means, I'm betting that they were trying to figure out who had the best chance of taking Jesus' place leading this band of brothers. Likely, it was not each of them vying for the top spot, but maybe two or three with the others lining up behind these, Bartholomew saying, "I think James has what it takes," and Matthew saying, "No, John's the man for the job." They may not have understood what Jesus' death really meant, in the big picture, but I think they were now beginning to get the picture that something was up, something that had the chance to profoundly affect them and all they had been devoting themselves to. And so, in the midst of this fear, and anxiety, and bewilderment, and hedging, it is no wonder their conversation is described as an argument. It is the perfect recipe.

I said before that although hedging may at times be a good strategy for staying in the game, it does come with a cost, an opportunity cost as the

economists put it, when they analyze investments and expenditures on the basis of what else your money could be doing for you. If you expend your time or money on one thing, it clearly cannot be used on something else. You make a choice. The disciples made a choice. They hedged, and in so doing, gave up something, something of great value: the chance to enter as deeply as possible into the mystery of what would befall Jesus in the final days of his ministry. Instead of riding out, in faith, the roll they were on, to gain the full payout, they hedged, and almost ended up with less.

I say almost because the good news of the Gospel is that God is not like a casino that takes eagerly but gives grudgingly. God gives generously and takes reluctantly. Jesus knows what they have done and calls them to himself and gives them back what they have lost by betting badly. For in the example of the welcoming of children, and in the reminder that those who would be great must be the servant of all, is the mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection, the big payoff for those willing to risk the gamble of faith. Gracefully, Jesus is not content to leave them with less than a full knowledge of what the kingdom is, and is like. And so he bails them out and serves up the object lesson that teaches the disciples that the road to greatness passes through humiliation, not power, that it is found in the helplessness and vulnerability of children, not in the ability to make others do your will. You see, God redeems the weak and lays low the strong.

That God rewards the servant over the master, the weaker over the stronger, is a sermon you have probably heard before. And so tonight I want to explore a little deeper the ways we take after our spiritual ancestors, hedging our bets. Let's start with some easy ones, some of the more benign ones, like the famous fox after the fruit in Aesop's fable, who, after repeated attempts to grasp what he could not reach, uttered that now-famous punchline "those grapes were probably sour anyways." Failing to reach his goal, the fox hedges both to save face, and to talk himself out of his disappointment. Those of us who have said, "That job wasn't in the cards for me," or "I guess it wasn't meant to be," have followed after the fox in masking our disappointment in cosmic terms, in forces beyond our control. Sometimes we go a little further and attribute the cause of such a disappointment to God and say something like, "God closes one door and opens another," or "God has something else in store for me," both very likely true, but nevertheless momentary hedge bets against the payoff we had hoped to receive but did not. The cost of these little white hedge bets is not particularly high in the overall scheme of things. This type may cause us to miss out on learning something about ourselves if we can be self-reflective enough to tolerate the pain of a little bit deeper form of disappointment for a little while longer, but they won't kill or maim us.

A more costly hedge bet is made when in protecting ourselves emotionally we behave in ways that we generally call sin. Take the case of the average adulterer. To my mind, an affair is nothing more than a hedge bet in case the main

bet, the marriage, doesn't work out, with the adulterer thinking, well, if my marriage fails, at least I'll have someone, or I will not have been so miserable, or any number of other delusional ways of thinking that led that person to place such an expensive bet. The cost, of course, is the richness of a marriage that might have been saved by applying to it the same effort given to the affair, the true partnership that results when we risk making ourselves truly vulnerable to our spouses, allowing them to see us in our all weakness and pain, when we are servants to them. The lessons offered by Jesus about servants, masters, and children apply to marriage as well, and by resisting the temptation to place that hedge bet, we have the possibility to enter more fully and deeply into the mystery of marriage, a mystery often compared favorably to the relationship between Christ and his church. Adultery is certainly not the only way we engage in this more costly kind of gambling, but it makes a pretty stark illustration.

Last but not least are the kind of hedges we make in our relationship with God, the kind for which the cost is a little harder to quantify, but which exact their toll nonetheless. Let me offer as an example my personal favorite hedge bet, the one made with respect to prayers for people who are suffering from life threatening illnesses. Oh, I'll pray for God to *cure* someone. That's my main bet, so to speak, and I believe it can happen. I really do. But as often as I make that bet, I'll make my hedge bet that if that person doesn't pull through, please God let your *healing* take place so that the remaining time people have left together can be graceful and

redeeming, that some good can come from the tragedy of a life ended too soon. It is not that I don't believe that God can cure the person, but I know the odds are better that a healing will take place, that reconciliation can happen, that goodbyes can be said in ways that reveal grace, that God will be with those who will grieve. Does my hedge bet reveal a lack of faith or just an experience with the reality that not everyone gets cured but that healing is still quite possible? What am I losing by making that hedge bet? What am I gaining? I can justify my hedge by saying that my little prayer isn't going to make or break God's mind to cure someone, that I'm not God after all, but what am I missing by failing to place my full trust in God's ability to heal *and* cure? In my more honest moments, I can see that perhaps I am missing making myself as powerless as a servant or as vulnerable as the child Jesus took into the midst of his disciples, the helpless one like he himself would become in the hands of his own torturers and executioners. It is humanity that crucifies the weak, but God who welcomes the helpless one, who accepts him or her not on the basis of what they have done, and thank God not on the basis of the hedge bets they have made.

My friends, I think we make our hedge bets when we lose sight of the fact that we can never make ourselves strong enough to protect ourselves from the crucifixions in our lives, from the betrayals, and the disappointments, from the unexplainable tragedies that accompany human life. We think that by making that hedge bet we will avoid losing the last bit of strength that just might keep us from

being overwhelmed by the really tough stuff. This is what the disciples were doing when they started planning to survive without Jesus rather than figuring out how to live with him through all he said he would experience. They can be forgiven for not wanting their friend and leader to die, but ask almost anyone who has had the honor of being present, truly present, with someone when they die, and they will tell you they wouldn't have missed it for all the world. In those moments of confronting their own mortality and weakness and their powerlessness over death, many a deathbed companion has found life, the kind of life Jesus offers through his death and resurrection.

Praise God that our God is in the forgiveness and grace business, that God redeems our understandable if silly hedges against pain. You know the Good Friday story. At that spinning of the wheel, the death of Jesus announced a second time in tonight's passage, the disciples hedged, laying down their chips on the better odds of a safe place to hide, or denial, in addition to the riskier gamble of proclaiming him as Messiah. They could have been at the side of he to whom they had pledged their lives, but instead they scattered like sheep, some watching from a distance, Mark tells us, as Jesus breathed his last, there but not fully so. God forgave them, and we became the church anyways, but oh what they missed: the chance to participate as fully as they could in the profoundest mystery the world has ever known. May we run the risk of seeing our trust in God through to the end, no matter what the cost, to claim the greatest prize ever offered. Amen.