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Playing It Safe

God does not want us to play it safe. Our Lord loves it when we are swinging at the plate, taking risks, wrestling with the world, in search of the meaning of life and ourselves. The aim of life is not to make it safely to the finish line with plenty of money in the bank and no one getting hurt. The aim of life is to find God and his will for our lives, no matter what peril or journey we must endure. In fact, the Bible tells us that apart from God there is no life. But in him, there is life abundant and eternal. We are fully alive when we place our faith in God. When we place our faith in ourselves, we eventually slide into a life that deadens our spirits, dulls our emotions and lowers our vision, no matter how successful we think we might have become.

For six months in 1969, I was a member of a confirmation class at the Winnetka Presbyterian Church in Winnetka, IL, where I grew up. Rev. Dave Donovan was our teacher. He was terrific, trying to make the Gospel relevant for a bunch of teens. We did such things as listen to "Jesus Christ Super Star," and discuss its relevance for our lives. Dave was an outstanding pastor, but he had his work cut out for him. He was standing at the crossroads of history. This was when people were leaving the Church in great numbers, during the late 1960s and early '70s.



Winnetka Presbyterian Church

There were about 40 junior high students in my confirmation class. I will never forget the Wednesday before the Sunday when we were to be confirmed. I found myself focusing intently on what we were about to do. I called Rev. Donovan and asked him exactly what we were supposed to say in front of the church on Sunday. He told me we were going to agree to two central promises: 1) belief in Jesus as Lord and Savior of the world, and 2) a willingness to become an active member of the church. I told Dave that in all honesty, I did not think I was ready to be confirmed. I said I was going to be playing a lot of hockey on Sunday mornings and not able to be an active member of the church. I also said I was still working on whether Jesus was savior of the world and my own life and that I needed more time to think about it. After all, rebellion in general was in the air in our country. Young

people were questioning all sorts of authority, I among them. Some were saying, "God is dead."

Dave could not have been more understanding. He told me that faith was a very delicate and precious thing, something you could never fake, coerce, or manufacture. He asked me to talk with my parents and tell them what I was thinking. My mom was a Sunday school teacher and my dad was an elder of the church at the time. They could not have been more understanding either. They told me how pleased they were that I had finished the class; but, the final decision of whether to join the church or not was entirely mine. When Sunday finally came, I and another friend were the only two in our class not to stand up and be confirmed.

Now, years later in 1986, imagine the surprise for many in this same church when Danny McNerney returned, but this time as a student at a local seminary, studying to be a minister. The congregation could not have been happier or more accepting. In fact, the members urged me to do my internship at the church and then later hired me as a full-time assistant pastor!

I needed every single one of those intervening 17 years to explore my faith in high school, college, and later in the work place. I thank God that my wheels did not go entirely off the track as I veered from one philosophy and lifestyle to another. But, always before me was the question of the meaning of life and whether God really existed. Finally, at a point when I was wrestling the most with who I was and *The Screwtape Letters* where I was going at age 26, God put a book in my hands that changed my life forever. On a plane flight to Caracas, Venezuela, (I was a molasses trader at the time) I read "The Screwtape Letters" by C.S. Lewis. At the time, I had no idea that book would be about God and faith. I subsequently read almost every book Lewis wrote and I began reading the Bible, too. It was then that I finally was ready to be "confirmed." I became a follower of Jesus and joined the Church.

Now, I am often asked to speak before confirmation classes. I urge young people to take their vows seriously, not to just mouth words because their parents and peers expect them to. I encourage them to honestly explore, challenge and ask about all their doubts and questions as they absorb the claims of the Bible and the creeds of the Church. I tell them God enjoys the person who wrestles with his or her own faith, as opposed to the person who mindlessly and blindly follows the traditions of their family or community.

God does not want us to play it safe. He does not want us to rely on our infant baptisms, regular church attendance, family traditions or good works to get us into heaven. He does not want us to meet merely the societal demands of having a faith affiliation because it seems the right thing to do. He wants us to be honest with him, telling him exactly where we are with our faith. God has always been especially present with the active seekers or "wild ones" in life. Consider the

ruthless honesty and gusto of Moses, David, the Apostle Peter, the prodigal son, and Saul of Tarsus. God has no problem dealing with strong-willed people who are questioning or even opposing him. What he cannot tolerate is people thoughtlessly going through the motions of life without honest and rigorous questions. He wants our hearts and he will do almost anything to reach us.

One of my personal heroes of the faith is Pastor Sameh Maurice of the Kasr El Dobara Church in Cairo, Egypt, whom I met in 2002. His Presbyterian Church with 8,000 members is the largest Protestant church in the Middle East. It sits right in the middle of Tahrir Square in Cairo, where uprisings, protests, demonstrations, and bloody conflicts have been taking place for the past two years. He and his parishioners have been offering medical care, words of comfort and love to the victims of violence. Pastor Sameh and his people need your prayers as never before as the violence in Cairo has escalated to new heights in the last few weeks.



Pastor Sameh Maurice

In a previous life, Sameh was a successful and respected heart surgeon in Egypt. Then God called him into full-time ministry. He once led a very comfortable life. He was well off. When he entered the ministry, his salary and lifestyle were reduced substantially. But that was 20 years ago. Now he sits at the doorstep of history, having become one of the most important voices in the entire Middle East for not only the Christian faith, but also for the path of peace, reconciliation and respect for all human life. Pastor Sameh is a person of courage, a risk-taker, often addressing issues and conflicts that frighten most people. Please take time to pray for him and his parishioners as they continue to provide words of wisdom and healing to a nation trying desperately to find the path of peace and freedom.

Faith in God makes life incredibly exciting, filled with action, meaning and purposefulness. God has plans for our lives we can barely fathom - if we only trust him! As God tell us in his Word, "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. (Hebrews 11:1)