

Success with Honor is a motto that is now being spoken of in a sarcastic tone. The result of a grand experiment, the results of which are not often noted, Success with Honor is now a sad, poignant paradox left to be picked apart by humorists and society commentators.

Penn State's Grand Experiment begun more than 40 years ago now has turned dark and ugly due to the all to present human beings who attempted to undertake it. And the motto that proudly titles the strategic plans of the Nittany Lions seems too empty, now with its leaders shamed and its most important value torn asunder. Honor is a hard thing to live up to, and yet again we see those who have failed.

To undertake such a bold direction is remarkable. In the 1970s when the Grand Experiment began, most folks watching college sports already saw what the future was to become: an industry more about making money for the school than it was about educating its students. Penn State decided to be different, and alone atop most lists that combine academic and athletic achievement they stand even today. So much has that athletic experiment been remarkable that it has imbued the entire university and region with its value. Strong attachment to the honorable goal that is pursuing excellence by the road of hard work and perseverance is part of the fabric of life at the state university. Sad that such an experiment is a rarity in college life.

Sad as well that such a noble aim has suffered from the ailment that brings so many noble experiments down: it is populated with human beings. Human beings who can be manipulated, lied to, self-deceiving, and worst of all morally crippled to a point that the demonic acts they undertake destroy humanity itself. We should be sick when considering what has happened, and my apologies if you have somehow not heard. Perhaps you will live a better life not having to deal with the details of the sex abuse scandal that has destroyed the lives of defenseless young men and former cultural heroes.

Yes, the knives are already sharpened by those who call for the dismemberment of anything having to do with this terrible crime. Justice at any cost, and the faster the better. I have a bit higher tolerance for mercy than others, and that has already left me open to the attack that I somehow support the sick perpetrator and the enablers around him, a

list of prominent people in the university and other institutions that grows longer by the day. Perhaps I find it too easy to remember the times I have harshly hurt others and failed to act to stop others from being hurt. (?) Please be reminded that Christians practice mercy, and believe in offering others the opportunity to repent and return to God's grace through confession, restitution, and forgiveness. Justice, meanwhile, is best served by slow, deliberate means, devoid of passion. We should not use our emotional passion and disgust to ignore one process and short circuit the other.

Undertaking a Grand Experiment is fraught with risk. Aiming an entire institution at such a noble and rare goal takes enormous effort. We can hold ourselves to high ideals and suffer the common failings that plague us as part of life, but to use one's energies to hold an entire massive system to an ideal that it seems no other similar program is doing is herculean in dimension. Impossible has been the word used to comment on such an aim for many decades now.

The great risk in undertaking such a task and aim is that it leaves one with less energy for observing the things outside the system. Sure we can focus our energy and attention with great effect on those things we want to change, but the more we focus on the problems that need our attention the more able problems get at coming in from other dimensions. The demons that plague us find even more avenues for exploitation when we devote increasing amounts of energy at one task. We leave more and more areas vulnerable. And that is precisely the risk.

We might take the Penn State tragedy as a pessimistic proof that we should not try to do such amazing things. By trying to reach so high, we will just fall that much farther. Better just to dig in and stay humble, better to not act and stay safe.

To this idea of playing it safe we have a gospel passage that speaks a different message. Jesus presents the disciples with a parable about three servants, three slaves who are given an amount of money. Two of them choose to risk it all and in the process reap a 100% gain on their investments. The third plays it safe. He buries the money in the ground, which for the time was the smart play. Remember, there's no Wells Fargo or PNC back then with triple locked reinforced steel and lead doors

with double locked safety deposit boxes behind them. The smart person buries the treasure, and let's no one know where.

The response from the man, the master of the slaves, is as vicious as it is just. The slaves who risked it all are rewarded for their returns, while the safe one is condemned. Playing it safe doesn't pay, apparently, even if it does protect us from failure.

Jesus knows something we do not know, something we find almost unfathomable on days like today, when the news is full of the repulsive details of horrendous acts. In the face of danger we are meant to risk. Disciples are called on not to play it safe, not to stay protected and humble, burying our resources for fear of them being exploited. Even if we know the devil himself is prowling, looking for the open window to exploit our weaknesses, our blind spots, we are meant to extend ourselves out. The resources we have been given are to be guided into outlandish goals and exuberant faith. We are on a grand experiment, one with a success measured in lives transformed for the better, souls brought closer to God, the kingdom of God made more real and visible.

Yes we will fail in multiple ways, as we always do. Some of our experiments will be flops. Some of the investments we will make may not turn out all that well. We may turn a blind eye to something we should have seen. And yes, the devil may find our blind spots to exploit. All the more opportunities for us to practice with deep commitment the confession that adorns each of our services. We will have more to bring to that practice the more we risk.

Success with Honor is earned by surviving many failures, a lesson sure to have been learned by the countless thousands whose lives have been changed for the better by their being connected with that Grand Experiment. Jesus calls us to take the risk with the talents we have been given, risking all of ourselves for his grand vision, the kingdom of God that we belong to, even if we have trouble seeing it some days. The challenge is to take the risk anyway.