

Risk-Taking Mission and Service
Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, Part 4

Matthew 25:31-46

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on October 23, 2016]

I

A management consultant was leading a seminar on risk-taking and decision-making. She borrowed an illustration that had been used many times before, but she gave it a slightly different twist.

She got a man from the audience to volunteer, and she said to him,

“Suppose I put a 40-foot steel I-beam on the floor in front of this podium. Would you walk across that I-beam for \$20?”

The man said, of course he would.

The speaker continued:

“Okay...suppose I take this same 40-foot I-beam and suspend it between two skyscrapers, 50 stories above the street. Now would you walk across it for \$20?”

This time the man responded, “No way!”

Then the woman went a step further. She said,

“Now suppose I’m on top of one skyscraper, and I’ve got one of your kids, and I’m dangling him over the edge. I say to you, ‘If you don’t walk across that beam and get your kid, I’m going to drop him.’ Would you then walk across the I-beam?”

The man hesitated for a moment then said,

“Which kid have you got?”

II

All of life involves risk.

We constantly have to decide if our goals are worthy of putting our lives on the line to achieve what we want.

Just growing up has risks,
 much less getting married,
 choosing a career,
 running a business,
 or raising children.

Even retiring can be risky.

But I think you will agree that if we don't take the risk,
we never receive the reward.

What makes the risk worth taking?

Churches have opportunities that might be considered risky.

Every church engages in some sort of service and mission.

The church needs people to teach Sunday school,
 serve on committees,
 hand out bulletins,
 support the work of missions,
and so forth.

There's nothing wrong with this kind of service;
 in fact, such things are necessary for the church to fulfill its mission.

But these are not risky endeavors.

Too often the church replaces risk-taking mission and service with charity.

Charity is safe.

Charity is what we do for ourselves in order to make *us* feel good.

Risk-taking mission and service is what we do for others because we,
the church, exist for others.

Risk-taking mission and service is the willingness to do something that makes us
uncomfortable,

takes us out of our comfort zone,
so that we can reach out and share God's love with people
who are in need outside our immediate circle of concern.

Doing risk-taking mission and service isn't just a nice thing for us Christians to do.

It's something that we must do.

It is the very reason why God has placed us here.

As someone has said, *the church exists for mission as a fire exists for burning.*

The church will die without mission—
maybe not overnight,
maybe not right away,
but it will die—
slowly and surely.

Fruitful congregations take service and mission one step further.

They engage the culture and community in risky acts of compassion, mercy, and
justice.

Excellent churches step out of the box of usual church life to serve their neighbors
in creative, life-transforming ways.

Fruitful ministry focuses on what God is doing *outside* the walls of our church.

Bishop Robert Schnase in *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* says ,

“Risk-taking mission and service is one of the fundamental activities of church life that is so critical that failure to practice it in some form results in a deterioration of the church’s vitality and ability to make disciples of Jesus Christ. When churches turn inward, using all resources for their own survival and caring only for their own people, then spiritual vitality wanes.”

Why is this important?

Why is it critical for an excellent congregation to be involved in risk-taking mission and service?

III

First, risk-taking mission and service transforms the life of the recipient.

Jesus was a risk-taker.

Jesus wasn’t safe or predictable, comfortable or convenient.

He got his hands dirty.

He shared God’s love with those who were on the edges of society,
those who needed help who no one else would help,
not just those it was easy for him to help.

When Christians take risks to help others the way Jesus did,
it transforms the lives of those receiving help.

Jeff Collins is a Christian who worked with Love in Action, a ministry with AIDS patients.

One Friday afternoon Jeff was ready to call it quits after a long week. At 4:55 his phone rang. It was a client named Jimmy, who suffered from several AIDS-related illnesses. He was sick and suffering with a fever. Could Jeff come over?

All the way over, Jeff complained to God about this inconvenience after giving himself to people all week long.

When he walked in the door, he could smell that Jimmy had gotten sick all over himself and the couch and the floor. He was too weak to clean himself up, so Jeff got busy cleaning up the mess.

Then Russ, Jimmy's partner, who also had AIDS, came down the stairs, smelled the odor, and he got sick. Another mess to clean up.

Jeff tried to maintain a façade of concern, but truly he was angry inside.

As he cleaned up the mess around Russ's chair, suddenly Russ spoke up:
"I understand! I understand!"

"What, Russ?" Jimmy asked weakly.

"I understand who Jesus is," Russ said through tears. "He's like Jeff!"

Then Jeff began to weep and hugged Russ and prayed with him.

That Friday evening Russ trusted Jesus Christ as his personal Savior.

God had used Jeff in spite of himself to show God's love to two men with AIDS.

As Robert Schnase writes,

"The stretch of Christian discipleship is to love those for whom it is not automatic, easy, common, or accepted. To love those who do not think like us or live like us, and to express respect, compassion, and mercy to those we do not know and may never be able to repay us."

Risk-taking mission and service transforms the lives of those who are served.

IV

Second, risk-taking mission and service transforms the life of the servant.

There is no way you can step out of the box and take the risk to help someone else without being changed.

Becoming a conduit for the love of God to one of his children will strengthen your own relationship with God.

It will deepen your spirit.

It will open up the wellsprings of compassion that you never knew you had, energizing you to serve even more.

Patricia Miller was an ER nurse who had learned to shut herself off emotionally from the trauma she saw every day. After five years in the ER, she had cases to treat, but really didn't see them as people anymore.

Then one day, God intervened.

Patricia had admitted a young woman who had overdosed on drugs and had attempted suicide. Her mother had brought her in and was giving the information needed. The mother had been awakened in the middle of the night by the police, and was so exhausted she could hardly speak above a whisper.

Impatiently, Patricia dragged the information out of the mother and jumped to the copy machine to make a copy of the medical cards.

Suddenly God spoke clearly to her and said,
"You didn't even look at her."

Patricia stood at the copy machine and heard the voice within her again:
"You didn't even look at her."

She felt God's grief for the mother and her strung-out daughter.

Patricia bowed her head and prayed, “Lord, I am so sorry.”

She went back to the admissions desk and sat down in front of that mother, and covered the woman’s hands with her own.

She looked deeply into her eyes and tried to send all the love she could muster and said, “I care. Don’t give up.”

The mother, of course, just exploded in tears, and she poured out her broken heart for her daughter who had struggled with drugs for years.

Then she thanked Patricia for caring—the one with the hardened heart.

Patricia Miller wrote:

“My attitude changed that night. My Jesus came right into the work place in spite of rules that tried to keep him out. He came in to set me free to care again. He gave himself to that woman through me. My God, who so loved the world, broke that self-imposed barrier around my heart. Now he could reach out, not only to me in my pain, but to a lost soul and hurting woman.”

Don’t enter into risk-taking mission and service if you are not willing to be led by God into spiritual places where you have never been before.

V

In risk-taking mission and service, both the one doing the serving and the one being served are transformed.

There’s a reason for that.

In risk-taking mission and service, **the one we touch is Jesus Christ.**

Jesus told the parable of the Great Judgment, and it appears only in Matthew.

But for Matthew it is the culmination of the teachings of Jesus, just before he begins the Passion story leading up to the events of Good Friday and Easter.

And the point is this: *Truly I tell you, just as you did it unto the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.*"

And the converse is also true: *Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it unto me.*

Those who do the former are rewarded with eternal life,
and those who don't—
well, let's just say none of us wants to go there.

Here is the simple yet profound truth:

when we serve others, we serve Jesus Christ.

The face of the unruly child in Sunday school,
the face of the teenager with an attitude,
the face of the elderly person with Alzheimer's,
the face of the homeless person,
the face of the immigrant who doesn't speak English,
the face of the drug addict,
the face of our spouse or our grandparent or a complete stranger—
is the face of Jesus Christ.

How can we not demonstrate as best we can the love of God for them?

VI

Tony Campolo, Baptist preacher, sociologist, Christian activist, tells how he was on his way to work, walking down the sidewalk in winter, dressed in his suit and overcoat, when he was approached by a filthy homeless man.

The man was covered in soot from head to toe, and had a huge beard, in which could be seen the remnants of several meals.

The man was holding a cup of McDonald's coffee and mumbling to himself, when he spotted Dr. Campolo and said,

"Hey, Mister. You want some of my coffee?"

Tony took the cup and drank a bit, just to be nice. He handed the cup back to the man and said,

"You're being pretty generous sharing your coffee this morning. What's gotten into you that you're giving away your coffee all of sudden?"

The man said, "Well, the coffee was especially delicious this morning, and I figured if God gives you something good, you ought to share it with people?"

Tony could feel the set-up coming, but he walked right into it.

He asked, "Is there anything I can give you in return?"

(He was expecting to be hit up for money.)

The man said, "Yeah, you can give me a hug."

In some ways, five bucks would have been better, but there on a Philadelphia sidewalk, Tony Campolo put his arms around this filthy, homeless man, trying to avoid the pieces of rotted food in his beard, and the man hugged him....and kept hugging him.

He would not let go. People were staring at the professor in the overcoat and the homeless man embracing on the street.

Tony was embarrassed, until suddenly his embarrassment turned to awe. He said,

"I heard a voice echoing down the corridors of time saying, I was hungry. Did you feed me? I was naked. Did you clothe me? I was sick. Did you care for me? I was the bum you met on Chestnut Street. Did you hug me? For if you did it unto the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did it to me. And if you failed to do it unto the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you failed to do it unto me."

VII

So what is God calling this church—First Presbyterian Church—to do?

God calls all of us to be bearers of the good news of the gospel.

And what is the good news of the Gospel?

The Gospel is that in Christ, God is on a mission...

recreating,
 renewing,
 reconciling,
 and restoring
 a broken and fallen world.

And we are invited to join God in that mission.

We are called to risk-taking ministries that push us out of our comfort zones to make a real difference in the lives of people...

Ministries that require hands-on, face-to-face engagement with the needs of people we might ordinarily not come to know...

Outreach ministries that impact the lives of people in our community who are not a part of our church.

Service and friendship to those in our community who have the least power—

the poor,
 the unemployed,
 the stranger,
 the hungry,
 the homeless,
 the abused,
 the addicted,
 the immigrant,
 the victims of violence.

As followers of Christ, we cannot live as if these things have nothing to do with us.

Christ moves us closer to suffering,
not farther away.

We cannot walk around oblivious to suffering,
ignoring it and denying it
like those who passed by the Good Samaritan on the Jericho road.

We can't moan about how somebody ought to do something.

We cannot just pray for those who suffer,
asking God to do for us what God created us to do for God.

The questions we must always be asking are:

“What is God calling us to do?”

“Where is God calling us to serve?”

VIII

Andrew Young served as a member of Congress,
as the Ambassador to the United Nations during the Carter Administration,
and as Mayor of Atlanta in the 1980s.

None of that prepared him for the time in 1985 when his youngest daughter surprised him by announcing she was going to Uganda to work for Habitat for Humanity.

Rev. Young couldn't believe that she would go to a country so far away and that was still dangerous after the civil wars and the terror of Idi Amin.

He feared for her safety (as any father would).

But she was a young adult and her mind was made up.

She felt God calling her to make a difference by building houses in a devastated country.

So Andrew Young found himself standing in the Atlanta airport on January 7, 1985, with tears streaming down his face, as he said good-bye to his daughter.

He stood at the window and watched as the plane took off,
taking his little girl—now grown up—to Uganda.

As the plane lifted out of sight, he turned away from the window, and one of his aides heard him mutter under his breath,

“I always wanted her to be a respectable Christian...but not a real one!”

What kind of Christian do you want to be?

What kind of church do you want FPCP to be?

Real Christians and real churches engage in risk-taking mission and service.

It’s how we bear fruit for the Kingdom of God.

It’s how we transform the world!

It’s how we touch the face of Christ!

Amen.

Sources:

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