

Family Matters...Being the Family of God 6: “Practicing Risk Taking Mission and Service”

Over the past few weeks we've been discussing 6 new practices that will help define who we (as a church) are becoming, and will help direct what we (as a church) are doing. We've called them “practices”, because that's exactly what we'll be doing... practicing these ministry and life priorities. The past 12 years we've been guided by 5 purposes, which have served us well...but its time now to start practicing these new priorities. I'd encourage you to memorize them.

Each practice is accompanied by a defining adjective that gives meaning and impetus to its fulfillment. The adjectives are powerful. Hospitality seems rather innocent but Radical Hospitality...well that seems...radical. Generosity seems appropriate for Jesus followers, Extravagant Generosity...well, that seems more challenging. Passionate worship must replace any other form or function of worship. Authentic Faith Sharing is certainly a challenge, but Authentic Christian Living is a beginning. Intentional Faith Development ought to mark us as Christians and as Methodists, considering our considerable heritage. And today, we'll end this discussion (for now) by thinking together about the practice of Risk-Taking Mission and Service. Again, as United Methodists, we've always been involved in Missions and we have learned to serve one another well...but Risk-taking...that might be another story. Well, let's hear a story that demonstrates what I mean:

Then a despised Samaritan came along, and when he saw the man, he felt compassion for him. Going over to him, the Samaritan soothed his wounds with olive oil and wine and bandaged them. Then he put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. The next day he handed the innkeeper two silver coins, telling him, 'take care of this man. If his bill runs higher than this, I'll pay you the next time I'm here.' Luke 10:33-35

I want you to notice the action this “despised” Samaritan took on behalf of this wounded Jewish stranger. Do you think there was any risk involved? This is what it says; *He went over to him, soothed his wounds and bandaged them. He put him on his own donkey, took him to an inn, and took care of him. He handed the innkeeper 2 coins, and promises to pay more if more expenses are incurred.* It made me stop and think... what a risk this guy took.

This wounded stranger could have been an actor attempting to draw a Good Samaritan into the ditch so he and his accomplices might attack and leave him for dead. The wounded stranger might have been faking it to gain some fiscal advantage or just a free nights lodging in the local Super 8. The stranger may never have said thank you, or shown appreciation in any way. The stranger might even wind up in the ditch again. It made me stop and think...what will we “risk”? If our Mission and Service is to match the example of the Good Samaritan, and the multiple examples of Jesus...what are we willing to risk? I know we do amazing things here at First Church, in terms of Mission and Service, but are we taking appropriate risks? In the name of Jesus Christ, I'd offer to you that we'll Risk the following 5 things.

1. PROFESSIONAL COST

“No, I insist on buying it, for I will not present burnt offerings to the Lord my God that have cost me nothing. 2 Samuel 24:24

This verse in the OT remind us that even the great King David understood that giving to God is meaningless, if it doesn't cost us something.

By Professional, I mean, we as a church will continue in the long legacy we have practiced since before the decision to start Med-Center One by giving significant and intentional dollars to support multiple missionaries, and mission projects; near and far. I know that some folks fear that our effort to build a new building will deter us from giving money to missions...all I can say is that on my watch, I'll continue to lead us to give at least a tithe of our annual budget to missions beyond our doors!

I've often been accused of bringing or allowing too many mission groups to come here and appeal to you for support. I've tried to respond that I don't need to protect your purse strings...you are plenty capable of doing that. It is my job to keep before all of us, the multiple opportunities to extend our ministry to the world. It is not up to me to decide for you which mission opportunities you might feel called to support.

I know there is "cost" beyond just mere dollars, but I believe that we as a church must always be committed with our energy, our time, our talent, and our treasures to grow God's church here and around the world. Doing anything well, for Christ's sake; will have a cost...but we dare not offer to God, that which costs us nothing.

2. PERSONAL DISCOMFORT

I want you to think about something. What have you done in the last 6 months that has helped the cause or status of another human being...that you would not have done if Jesus were not the center of your life? I know many of you are involved in political activities like writing our senators and congress persons. I know many of you are involved in civic and service clubs across this community. I know many of you use your employments to enable you to engage in your ministries when work ends. I know many of you are serving humanity through your work...but have you ever stopped to think that everything you do, because you are a Christian, is ministry, is mission, is service?

On the other hand, if you can't point to any one thing you have done to improve the life or well-being of another in the past 6 months...then you have to question the meaning of your commitment to Jesus. I'm not saying every person has the same calling, or gifting. Not everyone can go to Bolivia, or Thailand, or Guatemala, but we can support those who do. Not everyone can work for Young Life, or FCA or Campus Crusade, or World Vision...but when God brings opportunities like those to us...we must prayerfully consider how we might be involved...even when it makes us uncomfortable.

I have told every individual in each group that has gone to Bolivia that they will all get sick. It is just a matter of fact, that traveling to any country outside the USA, will likely result in someone getting sick. Are you willing to risk your own personal comfort to do something for God? I hope so, because that is one of the things we'll continue to risk.

3. POTENTIAL FOR REJECTION

The message of the Cross is foolish to those who are headed for destruction! But we who are being saved know it is the very power of God. I Cor. 1:18

I know that the fear of being rejected is great for some...it's not for me. I don't like it, but in my rational mind, I know that it is inevitable. I know that some people will get it, and some won't. It is not my job to protect Jesus from being rejected, or to protect you either; or me either. It is our job to faithfully serve Jesus by serving others, even when the recipients don't get it, even when they reject Jesus, even when they reject us!

The Good Jew in the Ditch might have rejected the despised Samaritan trying to help him. "Who does he think he is touching this sacred, holy, righteous Jew, with his dirty half-breed hands?" You see, Jesus changes everything...everything. In this day and age when everything sacred seems to be rejected, despised, and worst of all, ignored...the call is loudest, the need is greatest, the risk is tremendous, the rejection is inevitable...but Jesus compels us to face the rejection and keep on preaching, keep on living, keep on serving, keep on giving, keep on going, keep on believing, keep on practicing, keep on becoming THE CHURCH! We know it is the very power of God to use our fearful weakness, to build his unshakable kingdom, which the gates of Hell shall not overcome!

So what to make of the potential for rejection? Just remember who it is we serve, and why it is we serve. Jesus died on the cross alone, yet from this rejected Savior the legacy continues...and we are it!!!

4. POSSIBILITY OF BEING ABUSED

I know these last two are related, but there is a possibility that we might be abused if we offer assistance to someone in the name of Christ. I have to remind myself at times (and have done so in the past month) that sometimes when people are taking their anger out on me, they are really using me as a scapegoat, when the person they are really angry at, is God. I get to represent God to some folks in the good times and in the bad times as well.

I know that some people feel like we are being abused as Christians in the growing secularization of our American Culture. I'm not sure I buy that. Most of the marginalization we are receiving at the hands of our American culture we have earned by our Pharisaical self-righteousness, and stupid immorality, all while claiming to be Christians. It hurts me when another minister is uncovered in a scandal. But to claim that we are somehow victims in this country for following Jesus is largely a result of our own inactivity, our own laziness, our own misguided understanding of what it means to follow Jesus. It's not just about voting Republican or Democrat; it's about living faithfully, and obeying God's Word. It's not about winning some debate, or gaining some victory in a political shouting match, it's about modeling the life of Jesus when we hear squirming kids in the pew in front of us! It's not about right and left, as much as it is about right and wrong! It's not about watching FOX or CNN, it's about engaging the world, by helping at the Ruth Meiers house or Open Door, or Salvation Army. My friends, there is some possibility of being abused for serving in Jesus' name...but not much...and I believe it is worth it.

5. PROSPECT OF FAILURE

Then Jesus told them, "A prophet is honored everywhere except in his own hometown and among his own family". And so he did only a few miracles there because of their unbelief. Matt. 13:57-58

I would hardly consider 'only a few miracles' a failure, but it's important to remember that even Jesus had his setbacks. He often shook the dust off his feet in towns that failed to receive or welcome him or his disciples. He understood that even after 3 years of investment, one of his beloved turned against him for 30 pieces of silver. I've had plenty turn away for much less.

It seems obvious to me, that the fear of what might happen to the wounded stranger after the Good Samaritan left him in the hotel, never entered the Samaritan's mind. He did his good deed (exceedingly well by the way), without any thought that the guy might end up back in the same ditch again. I wonder why then we are so worried about what a potential recipient of our own good deeds, will do with our investment. There are no guarantees in life or ministry.

Much of our hardest work may have little visible impact or may seem to end in utter failure. Sometimes alcoholics we help return to their addictions, children we remove from violent homes run away again, homes we build are destroyed by the next flood, or disregarded from their owners. Youth we support with scholarships drop out after two years, and ex-cons we take a chance on end up back in prison. Like the seeds scattered by Jesus' sower that land on rocky ground, get choked by weeds, or gobbled by birds, many of our finest efforts come to no visible good. But like Jesus' parable promises, as we remain faithful to the task, a harvest comes forth in miraculous ways. Christ's ministry requires our willingness to risk...even failure.

John F. Kennedy, following a 1961 visit to an obscure orphanage in Calcutta wrote the sister in charge: "How do you plan to succeed in your efforts, for the needs are so great?" To which the humble sister returned mail: "God has not called me to be successful, but to be faithful."

That reminder from Saint Mother Teresa ought to inspire all of us, for that is our calling card, those are our marching orders, this is our agenda, and this shall become our practice; to be faithful, not successful. Failure is certainly an option...doing nothing because of that fear...is not!

I have one more question. Tell me why we shouldn't practice Risk Taking Mission and Service? Is there anything in the nature or character of God that leads you to believe that being safe and comfortable is the norm for God's followers? Is there any example in the life of Jesus where he chose to look the other way when needs came pressing to him? Is there anything in the 2000 years of Christian history that would indicate that the mandate to serve and give and risk has been changed? Is there anything in either our Evangelical, United Brethren, or Methodist heritage that would lead you to believe that we can ignore the needs of people near and far whom we CAN help? Is there any reason why we who say we love Jesus, should choose to ignore those whom Jesus tells us to love? Tell me why, tell me now. (play Tell me Why Video)

Is it risky? Yes. Tell me why we shouldn't assume that risk?

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What we will risk:

1. PROFESSIONAL _____

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2. PERSONAL _____

3. POTENTIAL FOR _____

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4. POSSIBILITY OF BEING _____

5. PROSPECT OF _____

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Action Step:

This week I want you to answer the question: What have you done in the last 6 months that has helped the cause or status of another human being...that you would not have done if Jesus were not the center of your life? If you are not satisfied that you have done enough, make a plan to get involved in some mission or service project.

Also: I want you to figure out how much you spent last year on Christmas gifts, celebrations, and food. Get that figure in mind and we’ll talk about it next Sunday. It relates to Risk-Taking Mission and Service

Study Guide:

1. Discuss the events of the Parable of the Good Samaritan, especially focus on the message Jesus was trying to teach as he used a Jewish guy in the ditch, and the Samaritan guy as the savior.
2. How much “Risk” should our church be willing to assume when it comes to Mission and Service? Are there other ways to define or look at risk? What projects should we be doing that we are not currently?
3. What about you personally? What is your level of Risk? What are you willing to consider doing? What would you not be willing to do? What are you doing now?
4. What about your fears of rejection, abuse, failure? How much do they ‘demotivate’ you? How much should they? How can you overcome them?
5. Discuss my opinion about our country and the seeming “victim” status so many American Christians seem to bear under point #4.

