

## **Risk Taking Mission©**

**Micah 6:6-8; Matthew 25:31-40**

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Can you believe it? All summer long and into this fall, I've had these 5 Practices of Fruitful Congregations on my mind. And I know some of you have had too! A number of you met at our house on Thursday evenings through the summer, for prayer and discussion, and are meeting again to discuss each of the 5 Practices. And now here we are, on the next to last one ... Risk Taking Mission!

For those who might be visiting, or who have been away, ... or have been asleep, ... during the worship services, we are focusing on this study as an all-church initiative ... reading about, discussing, praying and working on how we do the five practices that congregations who are vital and fruitful and growing do ministry and mission.

Robert Schnase, the author, who is a United Methodist Bishop with a great deal of experience with a number of congregations, has seen that congregations who practice these five things are congregations who are alive and growing in their faith and in numbers.

Those five practices are:

- Radical hospitality
- Passionate worship
- Intentional Faith Development
- Risk Taking Mission
- Extravagant Generosity

We have looked at how important it is to practice, not just hospitality, but a radical hospitality ... the kind of welcoming hospitality Jesus offered to people who were often excluded.

We have considered how our worship should be passionate – authentic and full of that deep love for God, as we offer our selves in praise and prayer to the one who has given so much to us.

We have been thinking about how our faith development has to be very intentional – how important it is for each of us to set aside time to pray and reflect on the Scriptures and to listen to God speak to us in that still small voice; but also, it is equally important for us, as the whole congregation, to be intentional about how we offer opportunities to people within our church family, and outside of our congregation for the development of faith among all people of all ages.

And today we consider what it means to practice risk taking mission.

Schnase states that risk taking mission is so important to the life of the church, that those who do not practice it – that is, those congregations who have become more inward focused than outward in helping others in need – fail to do it at the risk of their own decline.

Reaching out to others with care and love, was so important to Jesus, he actually said there will someday, when he returns, be a separation of those who cared for others and those who did not. He said those who cared are those who inherit the kingdom of God. That sounds pretty clear that is a very important part of who we are called to be as Christ's church.

Jesus said, "When I was hungry, you fed me"

"When I was sick, you cared for me."

"When I was naked, you clothed me."

"When I was in prison, you visited me."

And when they asked, "Lord, when did we do this?" Jesus will answer: "If you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me."

Have you ever helped anyone and then felt that you had been scammed? Maybe it became clear you had been taken advantage of? They "pulled the wool down over your eyes," as the saying goes?

That's happened to me a number of times over my lifetime. And it always makes me feel vulnerable and a little embarrassed at first; kind of silly, really, that I would fall for a story that was not true.

But then I remember this passage from Matthew. And I remember the one we've recently read from Hebrew's 13:12 that showing hospitality to strangers is perhaps to entertain angels. And then I think, that in God's eyes, it surely doesn't matter if I have been fooled as much as how my heart wanted to do something for others, because I have been called to do it ... in Jesus' name.

There is really nothing that has the potential to create new life or to transform a congregation, or motivate them to be enthused about ministry, like joining together to help someone else – whether it be adopting a family for Christmas, or giving to a family or group who are desperately hurting or, especially when they send a group off on a mission trip to learn and experience and grow.

I have had the opportunity to experience this first hand by going to the inner city with a group of teenagers. We had worked hard to raise enough money to be able to pay for our room and board so that we could help this congregation who were in the middle of a poor neighborhood in downtown Kansas City.

I had checked it out and worked with the pastor some and felt it would be okay, as far as safety goes. But it was a different story when we arrived. We were safe and we all remained safe the entire time we were there, but we were struck with the realization that people in that neighborhood were so vulnerable to gangs, as well as poverty.

This little congregation who had merged – Presbyterians and United Methodist – were aging and were few in numbers. The pastor had written and gotten a grant for them and they were doing amazing things with over 200 children in that mostly Latino and African American neighborhood. Every day of the summer, 5 days a week, their Peacemaking Academy met to teach alternative ways of dealing with the actions of gang members.

We even went to a restaurant where we shared a meal and heard a somber account of what life in a gang was actually like, from a former gang member. Some of the experiences we heard about were stunning. You could have heard a pin drop in that restaurant as we listened.

It was an experience that transformed us! We went back and the youth shared the experience with the congregation. The entire body saw the issues and deep problems the community was having through the eyes of the youth and adult sponsors who went. The congregation witnessed the passion and deep, authentic caring the youth had developed and, they too, caught the vision and wanted to do something for the community of people who were suffering so.

Schnase writes: “Christ pulls people out of themselves and into the lives of others where they would never have gone on their own.”<sup>1</sup>

We heard from Allen Lobst who is the missionary we support. His job is not easy, yet he seems compelled to live in a different country to enter the lives of others, to serve people – exhibiting the love of Christ.

In Kansas, the church I served had a partnership with a couple who are working long and hard to share the good news in Ethiopia. The partnership was a way that we could really take ownership, and we did what we could do help.

But our eyes were opened when they came and shared with us some of their moments in mission. We came away with a totally new perspective of what is happening in the world, and with a much greater enthusiasm for supporting the missionaries in their work.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, p. 93,

What are we doing to practice risk taking mission? Our own Constitution, part II – the Book of Order - says that the church is called to give of itself – even to the point of dying. What does that mean to you?

What I hear it saying is that, while it may not mean a personal, literal death, it could mean that because of a deep belief in Christ's call to go beyond the comfort of just doing the typical things in ministry, things that are safe and easy, we go against the norm, we move out of a comfortable, safe place and invite in those whom others might exclude.

Or, it may mean getting out of the safety and comfort of these walls and stepping into the world of our neighbors – getting involved in projects that help them have safety, shelter, food, justice.

I knew of a church in the presbytery in Minnesota, who was declining in membership and who did not want to die – at least they did not want to just let it happen without knowing they were doing their best to be the church in mission. So they did some research to see where the greatest need was and they realized that a large number of retirees lived on the other side of town. And there wasn't a Presbyterian church anywhere close.

After some planning and praying and talking with the people, they made the radical decision to close the church they had been worshipping in for so many years. They sold their building and they built a new one in a completely different location, in order to serve a large population who had no church. That was an example of being willing to die for the sake of taking the good news to others. The church today is growing and doing well, although it could have gone the other way.

We give of ourselves in service and love in a way that uses our resources and energy and we do not worry about who is worthy, and who is not.

Our Baby Pantry is one example of giving of ourselves. We serve many families, and it is rewarding, and doesn't feel risk taking most of the time.

But, any time we freely give to others whom we do not know, we take some risk – if not physical, then emotional or financial, or both.

Standing up for our beliefs in caring for all people, stepping up and stepping out of our comfort zone to help others, to do justice, to walk humbly with them, and God, can and has led congregations down a path that eventually led to their non existence – at least life as they had known it before.

Jesus said, "Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life will preserve it." (Luke 17:33, NIV) Risk taking mission is risking to lose the status quo of our

lives, dying, in order to really live, as we reach out as Jesus did, to give others a new and better life.

How are we doing today in this area? Our call is not to just run blindly out to do whatever we feel like doing, but to truly seek what God would have us do. And then be willing and ready to do what we are called to do. The church is called to mission. It is our purpose. Are you willing to risk it?

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