

Sermon Series: “Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations”
IV. The Practice of Risk-Taking Mission and Service

Luke 6:32-38; Matthew 25:31-46

February 11, 2018

We continue our series on faith practices observed in congregations that create and sustain a vitality that keeps them steadily growing in depth, in breadth, and in service to others. Thus far in the series, we have looked at “radical hospitality,” “passionate worship” and “intentional faith development.”

Radical hospitality in a community of faith focuses on the needs of those outside the church rather than focusing primarily on the needs of those in the church.

Passionate worship is an encounter between God and the gathered community of faith that orients us to the most vital and critical issues of life. Something significant is at stake, and worship helps us see what that is.

Intentional faith development recognizes that discipleship does not end with baptism or with a profession of faith ~ it begins there. Following Jesus Christ is a life-long endeavor, because we are always struggling to make our lives congruent with Jesus’ proclamation, his practices, his manner of life, his call to involvement in this world.

Today we address the fourth practice: risk-taking mission and service. Mission and service are outward-facing

expressions of faith. When congregations maintain primarily an inward focus, using their resources for their own care and even for their own survival, then spiritual vitality in that community typically diminishes. (p. 83)

Conversely, when a congregation works to make a positive difference for others outside the congregation, lives inside and outside the church are changed. Something happens when the faith community builds relationships, extends care to those in need, engages in hands-on efforts to build and teach and enhance the lives of those in their community.

Peoples' lives are changed. When those in desperate conditions have adequate housing, medical care, clean water, basic education ~ these people are more likely to be healthy and vigorous. When agricultural practices are taught, and training in business skills and the forming of cooperatives are exercised ~ these folks are more likely to be self-sufficient and productive.

Not only are those in need changed, but the mission participants are changed. The lives of church members are expanded as they see real-life conditions of poverty and depravation and hunger. Participants may be exposed to the remarkable courage of others who live life impoverished in things but rich in hope and faith and love. Participants in mission have the opportunity to catch a glimpse of what Christ is calling the church to do and to be.

Those in need are changed; the participants are changed. And congregations are changed. The vision caught by those who participate can infect an entire congregation. Focus shifts from what a church wants for itself to what the church can provide others who have crying deficits in the most basic of human needs for survival. Budget priorities shift. Programming in the congregation may refocus toward cultural awareness of others different than what is typical in the congregation. The church's reason for being may become broader and more open.

Matthew 25 is the scripture text that guides our reflection on risk-taking mission and service. I believe most of us are familiar with this passage. Jesus is teaching about the last judgment, and the qualities of life that characterize those who are judged.

Matthew 25 provides an opportunity for the preacher to deliver scathing hell, fire and brimstone message to sinners seated in the pews this morning. I hope you are up for it. It's important for the goats to know that they are goats and not sheep, and what they have coming to them. And since I am the preacher, I get to target the people I think are goats. Those of you seated on my right, this is your lucky day! Too bad for those of you seated to my left.

The day of judgment frequently is addressed in the manner in which I have just cast it. It is a message of fear and condemnation; it is a way for the speaker to manipulate the listener. Or it is not taken seriously—it's a joke. Both of

those approaches complicate a proper understanding of Matthew 25 and Jesus' reference to a last judgment.

When you look at all the Gospels in their portrayal of Jesus' message, what you find is only rare occasions when Jesus spoke in terms of judgment. And judgment, when spoken of at all, was typically directed to insiders of the faith. Jesus seemed well aware of the everyday hell in which most of the people of his time found themselves. The task of Jesus' earthly ministry was not one of telling folks how despicable they were and how deserving of condemnation.

He brought good news: deliverance from self-condemnation and the tyranny of legalism; he proclaimed forgiveness of sin, renewal of life and hope; he spoke of justice for the poor and oppressed; and he called people to expend their strength in service to God and neighbor. The fact that Jesus rarely spoke in terms of judgment and punishment should strike a cautionary note for us preachers and any one else tempted to bring condemnation and judgment on others.

The reality of this passage is that Jesus directs it, not to outsiders, not to unbelievers, but to people of faith. He was teaching his disciples about the kingdom of heaven. In a series of parables Jesus described both the faithful and the unfaithful in God's kingdom. And he concluded with the story we read today about the last judgment. It is a story full of surprises.

One surprise is how clueless the sheep were about good things they had done. The righteous of God say, “When, Lord, did we see you hungry and feed you? When did we do all of these things?” They are completely unaware. That shocks me. I remember every good thing I have done. My scrapbook has them recorded and when God says “I was hungry and you fed me,” I’ll say, “I know; I’ve got a picture of it right here on page 25.”

But they didn’t know. Isn’t that curious. They did not recognize God in the people they served. They seem unaware that their actions were serving the purposes of God. For them the work of God didn’t come in scrapbook moments or grand events. Instead it was found in the seemingly insignificant encounters of life, the ones that never showed up on the radar screen or in the newspaper.

When someone was hungry, they just took the time from their busy schedule to make sure she had something to eat. When word came of illness, they merely went by to check on him. It was nothing extraordinary; it was a small thing. One surprise of this story is that the small things done for those most insignificant loom large in God’s reckoning.

The church must remain humble in its assessment of how “good we are doing.” We really don’t know. Typical ways of measuring our performance aren’t valid in God’s Kingdom. A book with the title Toxic Charity details some of the downsides to people and organizations doing good things. It is an eye-opening and insightful read.

Another surprise we find in Matthew 25 is the criteria on which judgment is based. Look at what is missing: membership in a particular church; specific moral standards; perfect attendance in Sunday School. All the typical standards we in the church embrace are absent.

Instead, blessing or curse is determined on the basis of relationship and interaction with other human beings, especially with those who are the easiest to ignore: the hungry, the stranger, the naked, the sick and imprisoned.

Still another surprise is where God shows up in this scenario. God is disclosed in the presence of these needy ones. "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." The almighty God identifies himself with the weakest and most vulnerable.

Why this continues to catch us by surprise, I do not know. The Apostle Paul affirmed that Christ's death on the cross appears foolish and weak, and that God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, and what is weak in the world to shame the strong.

Robert Schnase writes in his book (which is the source of our series): "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." (p. 88)

That is the command of Christ we hear in Luke 6: “Love your enemies, do good and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

The church’s expectations for particular outcomes in doing mission are often misplaced. Maybe people will hear the gospel and respond. Maybe they will become active in our congregation. Maybe they will appreciate what they receive and be more productive. Maybe they will take initiative and become more responsible for themselves.

Yet Jesus said to expect nothing in return. The risk-taking nature of mission is that we face uncertainty in terms of its outcome. The results may be different than we predict or expect. The people who benefit from our mission may appear ungrateful or worse yet feel entitled to what they receive. We may insist on people meeting conditions before we give to them; maybe they have to “earn it” in some fashion. If we may become jaded and hardened to conditions of others because of their responses, we may fail. The challenges of the world and the messiness of people may turn us away from helping, and we refocus merely on ourselves.

What a terrible outcome of an effort to help others. So the church must discover anew that all of us ~ not only those

we serve but we who serve others ~ all of us need God's grace and care and love.

Unity Presbyterian Church has a long legacy of mission and service. That service takes place here at the church and out in our community and world: Living Waters for the World, Bloodmobile, Family Promise, the Nutrition Center, Habitat for Humanity, Second Harvest, CROP Walk and Dimes for Hunger, Adult Mission trips. Hundreds of our members are engaged by these efforts.

One challenge for many Presbyterian congregations, and probably for this congregation as well, is to move from organizational and financial support of mission to greater and more broadly supported hands-on involvement. Building homes by taking hammers and nails to a worksite, in addition to writing a check. Building relationships by listening to others and learning about their struggles face-to-face and first hand. Tutoring kids in schools; serving and feeding, sharing time and lending an ear and encouraging. This is where we move from "safe" mission to "risk-taking" mission.

When we are stretched beyond our comfort zone, when we attempt something that has the potential for failure or rejection; when our actions may elicit resistance to the very help we bring ~ this is when we engage risk-taking mission and service. When we give and get nothing back in return, not even a thank you, and yet keep serving anyway ~ this is risk-taking mission and service.

Providing hope, healing, feeding, teaching, caring ~ Jesus did all these things. He called it “proclaiming the Gospel”!

The task of the church is to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I believe it was Francis of Assisi who said, “Preach the Gospel; and if necessary, use words.”

So, what is God calling you to do? What is God calling the people of Unity Presbyterian Church to do in risk-taking mission and service?

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