

**Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations:
RISK-TAKING MISSION AND SERVICE**

Matthew 25:31-46

*Excellent churches step out of the box
to serve their neighbors.*

A sermon preached by
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There's a story about a management consultant who was leading a seminar on risk-taking and decision-making. She borrowed an illustration that had been used in many situations, but she gave it a little 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 that I-beam for \$20?" The man said of course he would.

The speaker continued, "Suppose I took this same 40-foot I-beam and suspended it between two skyscrapers, 50 stories above the street. Now would you walk it for \$20?" This time the man quickly responded, "No way!"

"How about \$100?" she offered. Still no way.

Then the woman went a step further. She said, "Now suppose I'm on top on 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 that beam and get your kid, I'm going to drop him.' Then would you walk across that I-beam?"

The man from the audience hesitated just slightly, then said, "Which kid have you got?"

All of life involves risk. We constantly have to decide if our goals are worth putting our lives on the line to achieve what we want. Just growing up has risks involved, much less getting married, choosing a career, running a business, or raising children. Even retirement can be risky. But I think you'll agree that without taking the risk, we never receive the reward. What makes the risk worth it?

Churches have opportunities that might be considered risky. Every church engages in some sort of service and mission. We have to have people to teach Sunday School, serve on committees, hand out bulletins, send money to missionaries, and so forth. There's nothing wrong with those sorts of service; in fact, they are necessary. But they're not very risky. Fruitful congregations take service and mission a step further and 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. Fruitful ministry focuses on what God is doing outside of our own church walls.

Bishop Robert Schnase, in *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, talks about “Risk-Taking Mission and Service,” which he says “includes the projects, the efforts, and work people do to make a positive difference in the lives of others for the purposes of Christ, whether or not they will ever be part of the community of faith.” Then he says, “Risk-Taking Mission and Service is so fundamental to church life that failure to practice it in some form results in a deterioration of the church’s vitality and ability to form disciples of Jesus Christ. When congregations turn inward, using all resources for their own survival and caring only for their own people, then spiritual vitality wanes and the mission of Christ suffers.”¹ In a sense, Risk-Taking Mission and Service is the outcome of being welcomed with Radical Hospitality, fed by Passionate Worship, and grounded in Intentional Faith Development. If you have all that going on, you have to get out and serve somebody! And if you are serving in a significant way, it will welcome others into a relationship with Christ; it will fuel your passionate worship, and it will develop your faith. It all works together.

Have we done any Risk-Taking Mission and Service at First United Methodist Church? You bet we have! We send a medical mission to Guatemala every year. We partner with schools in our neighborhood to provide food, clothes, mats, and support. We feed breakfast to the neighborhood once a month. We are involved with Salvation Army, Community Rescue Mission, and Hope Campus to provide ministries to the homeless and truly needy in our community. And oh yeah, we are part of the sack lunch program that provides thousands of lunches every year to hungry people. We have First United Methodist members serving in virtually every mission activity in Fort Smith—feeding people, sheltering the homeless, treating the sick, helping addicts—you name it, Methodists are there. We have people stepping out of the box all the time, and I have to believe that part of it has to do with them loving Jesus.

Is there more to do? You bet! There are still hungry children in our community. There are still families broken by drug addiction and poverty. Sebastian County still has hundreds of kids in foster care and hundreds of adults who are trying to find their way after being in prison. There are still many opportunities.

Why is this so important? Why is it critical for an excellent church to be involved in risk-taking mission and service?

First, risk-taking mission and service transforms the life of the recipient. People we help are really helped. It makes a difference in their lives. They are better for it. And when the help comes from somebody who loves Jesus, the people who receive the help know that Jesus loves them, too.

A couple of weeks ago a group of our Knitters and Knotters took some of their product to the preschool at Tilles Elementary, one of our partner schools. We have a group of about 25 ladies (and one gentleman) that meet every Thursday and knit plastic bed mats out of the plastic grocery sacks. They get all colors and really do some beautiful pieces. Someone from the school took video of the distribution of the mats to the preschoolers. The look of surprise and joy and gratitude on their little faces was priceless. Our ladies were there, smiling and hugging the little kids. Even better, as of yesterday, that video had been viewed over 7,000 times, as a witness to the love of Christ and the compassion of our church.

We see this sort of thing when we serve: the look of relief when a painful, infected tooth is removed in Guatemala, the look of gratitude when you put a plate of food in front of someone who has been waiting all day for something to eat. There's a look when the person served realizes that we are not serving them out of pity or a sense of superiority, but we serve them because they are children of God, and we are children of God, and we love one another because Christ has loved us. It transforms their lives.

Risk-Taking Mission and Service transforms the lives of those we help. But second, and perhaps even more important, **Risk-Taking**

Mission and Service transforms the life of the servant. There is no way you can step out of the box and risk yourself 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 to God. It will deepen your spirit. It will open up wellsprings of compassion that you never knew you had. It will energize 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.

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 clearly spoke to her heart and said, "You didn't even look at her." Patricia stood at the copy machine and felt the voice again, "You didn't even look at her." She felt God's grief for this 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—you know, the one with the hardened heart.

Patricia Miller wrote, "My attitude changed that night. My Jesus came right into the workplace 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 and hurting woman.”²

Don't enter into risk-taking mission and service if you are not willing to be led by God into spiritual places you have never been before. I remember sitting in a commons room at a mission house in Juarez, Mexico, about 20 years ago. I was leading a devotional for a mission team from our church. It was the last night after a week of construction. We had had a great experience, and God led me to ask the “What now?” question. I think what I actually said was, “What will be different in your life because of this week?” Would this just be a neat week, or did God have something greater in store for you? I didn't have any preconceived answers in mind for the group, and I don't remember what responses anybody made. But I know for one young woman, it was a question that changed her life. She decided she could not be content with her secular sales job any more. Neither could she be content to serve God as an active lay person. She felt a call to full-time Christian ministry. It took her a while, but she eventually went to seminary and was ordained as a pastor. She has now been serving in Arkansas United Methodist Churches for ten years.

In risk-taking mission and service, both the one served and the one serving are transformed. There's a reason for that. It's because **in Risk-Taking Mission and Service, the one we touch is Jesus Christ**. Jesus told this parable of the Great Judgment, and it appears only in Matthew. But Matthew puts it at the culmination of the teaching of Christ, just before he begins the Passion narrative leading up to Easter. It's the climax of the teaching ministry of Jesus. And the punch line is this: *“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”*³ 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 to me.”*⁴ Those who do the former are rewarded with eternal life, and those who don't—well, you literally don't want to go there.

The simple but highly profound truth is this: when we serve others, we serve Jesus Christ. We say that all the time, but think about it. The face of that unruly child in Sunday School, the face of that teenager with an attitude, the face of that old person with Alzheimer's, the face of that homeless person, the face of that immigrant who doesn't speak English, the face of that drug addict, the face of our spouse or our grandparent or a complete stranger is the face of Jesus Christ. How can we not love them?

One of my favorite stories that bears repeating today comes from Tony Campolo, a great preacher and professor of sociology at a college in Philadelphia. One day 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 bum. The guy was dressed in a nasty, greasy coat. He was covered in soot from head to toe, and he had a huge beard. In the beard were remnants of his last several meals. The bum was holding a cup of McDonald's coffee and mumbling to himself. He and Dr. Campolo made eye contact, and the bum said, "Hey, Mister. You want some of my coffee?"

Campolo took the cup and drank a bit, just to be nice. He handed the cup back and said, "You're being pretty generous giving away your coffee this morning. What's gotten into you that you're giving away your coffee all of a sudden?"

The bum 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.

Unfortunately the bum said, "Yeah, you can give me a hug." Five bucks would have been better. But there on the Philadelphia sidewalk, Tony Campolo put his arms around this filthy man, trying to avoid the pieces of rotted food in his beard, and the man hugged him back. And kept hugging him. He would not let go. People were staring at the

professional in the overcoat and the homeless bum embracing on the street. Tony was embarrassed, until suddenly his embarrassment turned to awe.

Campolo 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.*”⁵

I guess the question is, which group do you want to be in, the sheep or the goats? What kind of church do we want to be? Real Christians and fruitful churches engage in risk-taking mission and service. It’s how we bear fruit for the Kingdom. It’s how we transform the world. It’s how we touch the face of Christ.

¹ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations: Revised and Updated* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2018), 109f.

² Patricia L. Miller, adapted from *Pentecostal Evangel* (10-15-2000), pp. 9-11, *PreachingToday.com*.

³ Matthew 25:40.

⁴ Matthew 25:45.

⁵ Tony Campolo, “*Year of Jubilee*,” Preaching Today Sermon Tape #212.