Risk Taking Mission and Service

Matt 25:31-40

If you're not failing at something, you're not risking enough.

This morning we conclude our series on the five practices of Fruitful Congregations. For those who may not have been here for the whole series, so far we've talked about Radical Hospitality, Passionate worship, Extravagant Generosity, and Intentional Faith Development. As we've moved through this series, we've already talked a good bit about risk taking mission and service - about the need to move from the attractional model of church – come see what we have here – to the missional model – let's join in what God is doing in the world out there. As a retreat leader said recently, these two models illustrate the difference between showing up here "at church" and showing up out there "as church." The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams put it this way, "It is not the church of God that has a mission, it is the God of mission that has a church." Hear

that again, “It is not the church of God that has a mission, it is the God of mission that has a church.” Of course, we should practice both models, it’s both/and, but if we’re honest, most churches are more comfortable with “come here,” than “Let’s go out there.”

I’ve said this before, but for too many years, white Christians in the Northern hemisphere believed that we had all the answers – theologically and culturally, and we sent missionaries all around the world to spread the gospel – and make indigenous people everywhere worship and talk and dress and think just like we did. Today we are doing better about honoring the beautiful diversity in our world, but we still hold on to traces of that savior mentality. I haven’t been on a Brethren Disaster Relief trip yet, but I trust that our folks are different from an Anglo congregation that held annual home repair and construction projects in poorer, predominantly Hispanic neighborhoods. For three days, the chosen homes for that year turned into work sites with dozens of volunteers arriving in SUVs, holding their Starbucks cups, unloading high-dollar tools and playing

their chosen music while they worked. (PAUSE) Some sensitive team members began to notice the families they were serving retreat more from the site and the workers each day, and the team members rightly became concerned about how the people who lived in the homes felt about the experience.

The church wisely contacted Hispanic sociology students from a nearby university and asked them to follow up with the families. The families reported feeling a loss of control about their homes, they were self-conscious and embarrassed about the language barrier and having to receive help, and they felt rejected when their efforts to help with the repairs were rebuffed. They were grateful for the work, but they felt invisible as people talked about them in their presence. Ouch, I'll bet that feedback was hard to here. But, I am happy to report that this feedback led the church to radically revamp their ministry with far greater sensitivity and respect for the families they were serving, more intentional personal engagement, and mutual conversations in the residents heart language throughout the project.

Friends, this story illustrates that we will be much more fruitful in mission and service if we view our service as sacred partnerships with our neighbors near and far. At a church in Texas, a middle aged couple helped their church do just that. They began to feel a strong and persistent nudge to come alongside their region's homeless community. Instead of presuming what the homeless needed, they started out by doing their research. (By the way, this is just what our team working on the initiative to reach the younger generation is planning.) In TX, the couple wanted to know, Where did their homeless neighbors stay? What did they need most? They found that many lived in small camps near the interstate by the river. They said they needed socks, underwear and batteries. The couple brought those items and then they stayed to visit, they listened and shared stories and experienced awkward and beautiful moments. They began to wonder if the camp residents would welcome a worship service at the camp – and they discovered that they did. So they invited their pastor to

come and lead communion. This initial service evolved into a monthly event with a large number of volunteers.

Some church members made flyers to pass out at other camps nearby. Others met at the church early on Saturday morning to load up tables, sound equipment, musical instruments, coffee and breakfast, along with bags of food and clothes collected that week. They went to the camp to have church, but also to BE the church.

The next month, something wonderful happened. When the folks from the church arrived at the camp, they were met by a welcoming party of their new homeless friends. They had gathered early to sweep the area free of debris and cigarette butts, they had emptied the trash and readied **thei**r space for worship. In sacred partnership, they worked alongside the church volunteers unloading the trucks, setting up tables and chairs and distributing song sheets. The homeless community was now extending reciprocal hospitality to those who had come to lead worship. When we focus on relationships and people, we achieve a level of genuine engagement,

mutual listening, and learning. When we focus on relationships, it changes us and our churches.

Back in TX, over time, it became clear that there were two important unmet needs in this community – access to showers and laundry. The church was in the process of building a new space for their expanding food and clothing ministry. In response to the mutual partnership with their homeless neighbors, they decided to add two family restrooms with fully ADA accessible showers. They also added two washer and dryer sets to their plans. The ministry is now open 4 days a week and is totally staffed by volunteers. They are truly living into providing for the least of these, and ultimately to Jesus.

Now, here's the thing, most churches are really good about starting programs or initiative that they are confident they can succeed at. We're good about starting programs or initiatives that are fairly comfortable for us. We rarely try things when this is not the case. But, my colleague at the Center for Healthy Churches argues that this is a problem. He puts it this way: If your church isn't failing at something, you're not risking enough. If we're

not failing at something we're not risking enough. Of course, we don't want to fail at everything we try, but the reality is that not everything we try will work the way we first envision it. And that's okay. Remember the story last week about the ministry to college students? It took the leaders 6 tries to find the best time for that group to meet.

Folks in Scripture who answered God's call took significant risks, and things didn't always work out for them the first time either. Abram was called late in life to leave all he ever knew and journey to a new land, and he made his share of missteps along the way. Moses insisted so fervently that he couldn't possibly be God's spokesperson that God finally sent him Aaron to go with him – but it still took 10 trips to Pharoah before Pharoah let the Israelites go. The disciples left their homes and their professions to follow Jesus, and the gospels are full of both their successes and their failures. In the early church, Paul and other church planters faced persecution and I'm sure the were often frustrated at the mistakes and conflict in the congregations they founded. (PAUSE)

We cannot expect things to be different for us, can we? One of our new initiatives focuses on immigration work, and it will take risk and courage to host and walk alongside our brothers and sisters who need our care.

Showing up in new schools for the first time will be unfamiliar and uncomfortable, but we will do it because we are committed to the children and their families who need our care. There is always some uncertainty travelling to a new disaster relief site or to the veteran's shelter, but soon we build mutual relationships and strangers become friends and beloved brothers and sisters. It is always a risk to open our building to others – but reminding ourselves that it belongs to God and that we are the stewards of it can help us reach out in love and care.

So, WRCOB family, I pray that we will be a thriving congregation well into the future, that we will offer Radical Hospitality, that we will continue to gather for passionate worship and continue to practice extravagant generosity, that we make intentional faith development and risk taking mission and service a

priority. As we seek to do these things, let's remain open to discerning how God is at work, and may we stay tuned to how these sacred partnerships will evolve and expand in the future. I'm excited to see where God leads, aren't you?

And all God's people said, "Amen."