

“Risk-Taking Mission and Service” (4th in “Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations” series)

2 Kings 5:1-14; Mark 1:40-45

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There are lots of different answers to the question: “What makes a church great?” When you’ve shopped for a church you have asked this question as you have evaluated various places of worship. Our congregation is currently engaged in a series of studies which challenges us to ask the question in a somewhat different way. “What makes a church fruitful?” What makes a church vibrant, alive, growing--bearing fruit for the Kingdom of God?

In this series called “The Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations,” we’ve already talked about:

First: the practice of Radical Hospitality. When churches show radical hospitality they “have an active desire and plan to invite, welcome, receive, and care for those who are strangers so that they find a spiritual home and discover for themselves the unending richness of life in Christ.” They “go the second mile” in welcoming all—even those very different from themselves (*Cultivating Fruitfulness*, Robert Schnase, p. 7).

Second: the practice of Passionate Worship. “Passionate worship, whether traditional or contemporary, means an extraordinary eagerness to offer the best in worship, honoring God with excellence and with an unusual clarity about the purpose of connecting people to God. It is worship that is not dry, routine, or boring, keeping the form while lacking spirit. It is not performance; it is devotion and celebration expressing our love of God” (*Cultivating Fruitfulness*, Robert Schnase, p. 25).

Third: the practice of Intentional Faith Development. “Intentional Faith Development refers to all the ministries that help us grow in faith outside of weekly worship: Bible studies, Sunday school, small groups and retreats where we learn in the community of other Christians. By these practices we mature in faith; we grow in grace and in the knowledge and love of God. We pray that we are closer to Christ today than we were five years ago, and that by the grace of God,

we may be closer to Christ five years from now than we are today” (*Cultivating Faithfulness*, Robert Schnase, p. 43).

The quality or practice that we are focusing on today is **Risk-Taking Mission and Service**. “Risk-taking congregations do not ask how much a program costs; they ask how many people it will reach. Risk-taking, service-oriented congregations don’t talk about their seating capacity; they talk about their **sending** capacity. How many people can we send out to be involved and engaged in changing other peoples’ lives in the name of Jesus Christ?” (“Claiming the Yet-to-Be in the Now” sermon by Dan Jackson, in *Five Practices Leader Manual*, p. 131)

In the summer of 2008, our congregation sent a mission team to Haiti. Amid warnings of danger in Haiti, they went. Literally “armed” with their various immunizations they entered a country where one can easily get sick. They went without knowing the language or exactly what they’d face in Haiti. They had to move out of their comfort zones. We as a congregation also did some new things as we helped them raise the funds to go, as we sent them off with our prayers and letters of support and encouragement and as we blogged with them while they were there.

If you were here when our team led worship and shared their experiences with us, you know that this risk-taking mission and service changed them and changed us. Our collective ministry to Haiti through Bruce and Deb Robinson and through our mission team is bearing fruit for God’s kingdom.

Our National/World Mission Team is already working to raise funds for another mission trip to Haiti in 2010. They are already praying about who will go. Let us add this future mission trip to our daily prayers even now. And don’t forget to buy your chili next week!

Jesus was the ultimate risk-taker in carrying out God’s mission. In our scripture reading from the Gospel of Mark, a leper came to Jesus begging for healing. Leprosy was a most dreaded disease. Thought to be contagious and incurable, this disease caused its victims to be ostracized from society, from their families and from the faith community. It made its victims “ceremonially unclean”—unable to participate in worship.

Jesus was moved with pity and compassion for this man who had lost everything. He took the risk of touching the leper, of exposing himself to the disease—something that could now make Jesus unclean in the eyes of the Jews.

Jesus also took the risk of then being overwhelmed by people just like this leper who would come to him for healing. In fact, despite Jesus telling the now-healed leper to keep quiet about his healing the man couldn't contain himself. He told everyone he could find. The word got out so fast that Jesus had to change his ministry strategy. He could no longer go into a town openly because he would be flocked with people. Instead, he stayed in the country and people came to him.

We weren't sure we could do it. We were a church of about 95 members at the time. Nestled in the Shenandoah Valley, we felt immune to many of the struggles of people in our world. But then we got the call. The Refugee Resettlement Office in Harrisonburg, Virginia needed help. They had a family of four arriving from Kazakhstan and they needed a church to sponsor them. Would we do it, they asked. What does it involve we asked? Provide housing upon their arrival, set them up in an apartment with furniture and basic necessities, pay the rent and utilities for three months, help them get accustomed to the U.S. (shopping, banking), help them get established with doctors, school, English as Second Language classes, help the children get registered for school and work with their teachers, and help the parents find jobs. We weren't sure we could do it.

As our session at Elkton Presbyterian Church sat around the table at our called meeting to discuss this request from the Refugee Resettlement Office, God did an amazing thing. We got past what it would cost and turned our focus to the family we could reach. This ministry took us all out of our comfort zone. It wasn't easy, but God provided in every way. Our congregation went on to help resettle a family from Bosnia and to partner with another congregation to settle a Kurdish refugee family. Every time we were stretched beyond what we thought we could do. Every time it involved risks. Every time God provided. The Elkton congregation was stretched and changed by these opportunities for risk-taking mission and service.

We didn't think we could do it here at Denbigh Presbyterian. Serve as a host church for the PORT homeless ministry? House and feed 100 or more homeless guests for a week at a time in our church facility? We didn't think we could do it. Yet as the church officers talked and prayed, they got past what it would cost in manpower and space and even money and looked at how many people we could reach in the name of Christ. The leaders focused on how we could alleviate the suffering of a few of God's children, even for a short time. It hasn't been easy. But

God has provided. We have been stretched—sometimes almost to the breaking point—but God has provided.

One of the risks of being active in mission and service is that we will be subject to criticism, sometimes even from those we are serving.

In 2 Kings we read of the prophet Elisha becoming aware of Naaman—an army commander in a neighboring country who had leprosy. He invites Naaman to come to him for Naaman longs to be healed of his dreaded disease.

Naaman is a hot-shot. He's used to being in charge. When he arrives in Israel to see Elisha he is infuriated that Elisha doesn't even come out of his house to greet him. Instead, Elisha sends a messenger who tells Naaman to go wash himself in the Jordan River seven times in order to be healed. Naaman is so incensed he starts to leave. "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy!" Aren't the rivers back home better than the waters of Israel? Naaman nearly misses out on getting healed because of his own pride and stubbornness.

One of the risks of being individuals and being a church who put ourselves out there in mission and service is that we are subject to criticism—sometimes even from those we are serving. Notice though that Elisha didn't hold Naaman's pride, initial resistance and criticism of his healing methods against him. He didn't hold it against him. And that's a good reminder to all of us.

The story of Elisha and Naaman is also a good reminder that sometimes we are the recipients of the service and mission of others. It is often more difficult to receive help than to give it. Yet, we all are in need at one time or another. It's risky to receive help, too. It messes with our pride. Yet every time we allow a fellow believer to help us in our times of need, we offer that believer a gift—the gift of the opportunity to serve in Christ's name.

It is a joy for me to see within our congregation even our youngest members engaged in mission and service. Watching our elementary children and our youth Christmas carol at three nursing homes was an amazing experience. I watched them tenderly go to each resident who came to hear them sing to offer a handshake or a hug. I watched even our very youngest children present their handmade Christmas ornaments to the people at each of the homes. This stretched our kids to go into unfamiliar situations to make personal contact with people they did not

know. With the support of their leaders and parents, they were stretched in risk-taking mission and service.

“Risk-taking mission and service is one of the fundamental activities of church life that is so critical that failure to practice it in some form results in a deterioration of the church’s vitality and ability to make disciples of Jesus Christ. When churches turn inward, using all resources for their own survival and caring only for their own people, then spiritual vitality wanes” (*Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, Robert Schnase, p. 83).

My hope and prayer for each person here today is that we will on a daily basis allow God to stretch us in any risk-taking mission and service to which God calls us. My hope and prayer for our congregation as a whole is that we will collectively and daily allow God to stretch us in any risk-taking mission and service to which he calls us.

Today as you depart, you will receive a rubber band as a reminder to allow yourself to be stretched into service this coming week. Carry it with you. May we consistently move beyond considering how much it will cost us in time, energy, money or whatever to considering how many people God may reach through us. Let us be stretched this week and every week.