

*Rev. David Hodsdon
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Risk Taking? Mission and Service!

*#4 in the Series on 5 Practices of Fruitful Congregations
The video version is slightly abbreviated.*

Mission and Service has been identified as one of the “side doors” through which many people today will connect with the Church, and partner with us, even if they want little or nothing to do with the trappings of religion generally, or Christianity more specifically.

In this case, I think the qualifying adjective selected by the bishop has unfortunate overtones (or undertones) today. So let’s first take a moment to consider what we do NOT mean by the term “risk taking”. Then we will address “mission and service” more generally.

We have considered ways of adapting other strategic practices to our new circumstances, and we can do so here also; so, finally we will consider very briefly what Risk Taking Mission and Service might look like in our pandemic environment. Right up front, by “Risk Taking” we do not mean irresponsible behavior.

There are some people who, in the name of Americanism’s clause of “religious liberty”, and even in the name of “following Christ”, are insisting on engaging in everyday activities, and more particularly what we had considered to be “normal” religious activities, as if there were no health considerations to be taken into account.

To be blunt, I consider this to be, at the least, irresponsible in the extreme. At worst it is profane, an egregious abuse of religion, taking the name of God in vain.

When a “super-spreader” event is identified, and studied, we should learn from it. Failure to pay attention is irresponsible.

“Normal” Church functions have been the sources of some such some clusters of infections, and even when they believed they were taking reasonable precautions. When we DO take precautions and become the source of harm for others, that is regrettable.

When we fail to take precautions, and people become ill, and people die, ... that is, to be blunt, criminal negligence. It is the height of hubris for some to say,

Faithfulness to Christ prohibits us from observing the restrictions they want to impose on our corporate worship services.”

You may recall that pride has long been considered one of the “deadly sins”. I suggest further that preaching this philosophy (“*social responsibility does not apply to us*”) is an abusive weaponizing of religion, and a good reason for the un-churched and non-religious to be so “done” with Christianity.

In short, to be “risk taking Christians” does not require that we go down THAT road of irresponsibility. We can put forth a different vision of following Christ; One that respects science, including medicine, and respects human life and dignity.

We will return to a healthy understanding of risk taking in a moment. But next lets consider Mission and Service.

In his book, Bishop Schnase works with the twin movements of “come and see” and “go and do”.

“Come and see” means that we are invitational. It means we do the “if you build it they will come” things that are part of following Christ.

It means putting our best into worship, not as if worship were a performance but truly... as a deep expression of who we are, each and all of us.

It means putting our best into intentional faith development, as a community, each and all of us.

It means being genuinely hospitable ... to each and every person we meet, responding with openness and respect, .. and interest in and support of ... diversity.

When we are embodying the Kingdom of God in these practices, we have something worth noticing, something to which we can invite people, saying “come and see”. This is “preparing a feast”.

This is part of how the early church grew; people inviting others they knew to come and see what they had found in “the good news”, the Gospel, of Jesus Christ.

The movement that is twin to this is “go and do”. It is noticing, as the early church did, those who were falling through the cracks of the social safety net, and acting to do something about it, as reported in the Book of Acts, ch 6.

The church *becomes* the Church outside the four walls of her facilities.

The Church *becomes* the body of Christ as we interact with the larger world around us... those who are not part of our number. The Church is being the Church *when* we are bringing grace to an otherwise graceless time and space.

If the only people with whom we deeply connect are other church members... then how are we bringing light and life and hope to the woman at the well, the traveler robbed, beaten half to death, the beggar on the street corner, and all the other marginalized people we see in the ministry of Jesus?

Before you start feeling too guilty, or shamed, by that question, we need to recognize that it is human nature to find people of like mind. We enjoy the company of people with whom we have things in common. God made us to be social creatures, and that is a good thing.

What we also need to recognize is the the Spirit of God is like a breeze, blowing us out toward others that are not part of our immediate clique.

There are at least two obstacles that can get in our way. One is the aging process; another is our basic personality type.

As we age our circles begin contracting; People move away, and people die. Loneliness is a major issue among seniors. Notice... that is a mission field. It is a group to whom we freely can bring light and hope.

The extravert personality type may have less difficulty in this social engagement than the introvert type. Introverts gain their energy from alone time. Social occasions can be exhausting, and the larger the gathering the more draining.

Extraverts on the other hand will be excited by and energized by the occasion.

These personality traits affect also the way we interact in more restricted social engagements.

The introvert is introspective and listens to others carefully. They sometimes will pick up on cues that others miss. Extraverts can bring energy to events, and be driving forces for completion. *Both* are valued.

The church is comprised of many people with varied gifts, each of which are to be valued and respected in their own right. And we seek harmonious relationships with one another, despite our differences, as Paul admonished in his letter to the Philippians.

Jesus' parable this week was about the mission of the Church. Though Matthew does shape it somewhat into an allegory; allegory it is not, (eg, with each part of it standing for something else.)

Rather it is intended to be a parable with one main point. Luke offers the same parable, telling it slightly differently, in chapter 14. You will want to read his telling of it too.

Children especially may enjoy one of the retellings of the parable that you can find linked in the show notes.

The Banquet Parable for Children
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LEbwiQvo5k4>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4f7DZZgAPpY>
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=80UhWO_wjHY

The point of the parable is that God desires relationship with us, wants us to be part of the party, part of God's celebration.

And God invites us regardless of character or merit.

The servants went out into the streets and collected everyone they found, without regard to merit or character; and the reception-hall was filled with guests.

The literal words are more like...

The servants went out into the roads and collected all the people whom they found, whether bad or good; and the bridal-hall was filled with guests.

Do not stumble because of literalism in reading this parable. The point is not that the kingdom of God is comprised of criminals, but rather - that merit or character has nothing to do with God's invitation.

We all are there only because of grace.

Remember Moses interceding for those who disregarded God's very plain direction, standing in the gap. That too was grace.

Today we see those on the margins, street-people, disparaged as persons of low-character.

Some have disparaged as criminals, immigrants who are displaced... refugees, merely because they were seeking a safe haven someplace ... because where they came from was NOT safe. To send them back where they came from is extremely UN-Christian, & desperately inhumane.

We need to purge ourselves of any such tendencies, recognizing that God sends us out into our world to be grace and light, expressing compassion to everyone, and without trying to ascertain character or merit.

Maybe this is where some of our risk taking needs to take place today. We need to go against the grain of the society in which we are embedded, asking about merit.

We are representatives of the Kingdom of God, offering grace and light, compassion and hope, in a graceless world.

Maybe that will mean doing something like Kaze Gadway does in the desert southwest.

<https://kazestories.wordpress.com/>

Maybe it will mean Worship under the Bridge, as in New Braunfels Texas.

<https://www.churchleadership.com/leading-ideas/worship-under-the-bridge/>

Maybe it will mean partnering with our school system to ensure that the underprivileged students are having some of their needs met, as Bee Creek UMC does.

<https://www.beecreekumc.org/outreach/serving-locally-and-globally>

Bishop Schnase has a raft-load of ideas in this chapter of his book that are helpful for a time when we are no longer constrained by the health precautions we presently observe for the pandemic.

But being missional ...
serving those at the margins ...
it doesn't need to wait. It cannot wait.

Perhaps we stand in the gap, interceding in prayer for those in power and authority, that God will continue to move by God's spirit, to guide and direct them in the ways that are right.

Perhaps we can stand in the gap, interceding in prayer for those who are seen as enemies of our nation, whether leaders of Russia, or China, or North Korea, or Iran...

Voting is another way to bring grace to our graceless world, one way we can impact our society for the better, alleviating the needs of the disadvantaged.

But it cannot wait for November.
People have needs now.
People in our neighborhoods have needs ...
right now.

That is where our mission takes us,
... right on OUR street.

God wants everyone at the party,
ready to dance.

God sends us...
Go out and invite whoever you find.

Be representatives of the Kingdom of God;
offer grace, light, compassion and hope,
in this all too often graceless world.

*Note: The links provided here, in text form,
are also provided, as links,
on the video page on YouTube.*