

Risk-Taking Mission and Service

Luke 4:18-21

John Breon

Our youth pastor, Tim Ford, tells about a mission trip he took to the Dominican Republic in 2011. A significant difference he saw in the culture there was the high priority the Dominicans place on family and community. They were less organized and goal-oriented, but they seemed happier. The mission team would start the day with a punch list and they might get half of the tasks done. But they were also doing prayer walks and meeting people in their neighborhood and homes. They developed real relationship with the Haitians and Dominicans they were working with to finish a church building.

At the end of the week, with the building complete, the team went into the community and invited people to join them at the church. They performed a drama there. Then the pastor gave an invitation for anyone to receive Christ as Savior. A Haitian worker, who had worked with the team all week, stepped forward and gave himself to the Lord.

One of Tim's passions is basketball and he wanted to find a way to share that with the people they went to serve. After weeks of planning prior to the trip, he bought three bags and was able to pack them with the parts and tools needed to put up a basketball goal. The first day in the Dominican Republic, he laid out all the parts and talked to the pastor about how he wanted to set up the goal for them. Tim still needed to go to a hardware store to get a post and wood for a backboard. The week went by and he didn't have that opportunity. He worked with some kids to clear a space for a basketball court. Finally, on his last day there, the pastor offered to take him to the hardware store. With just a few hours before the flight home, they were able to buy what was needed and put up the goal. Tim claims he hit his first two shots from the three-point line before handing the ball to the pastor. As he was leaving, he was in awe of God's greatness. The backboard had these words on it: "House of Restoration." That was a reminder that God mends hearts. God forgives and restores through grace and mercy. Jesus gives us the example for how to live as he becomes a

servant, and he tells us, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.” When we do this and let God lead us we’re in for a lifetime of amazement and awe.

Some of you have gone on Volunteer in Mission trips. Others have worked locally on service and mission projects. A few years ago, several of us helped with building a house in Caddo to provide adequate housing for someone in need.

We have greeters, ushers, people staffing the welcome table, and prayer volunteers. We can always use more folks in those roles. We have volunteers who deal with the church’s property and finances. We have teachers and helpers in Sunday School. We have musicians and singers. On the first Sunday of each month, we have people who prepare the bread and juice for Communion.

Some of you deliver Meals on Wheels. Many of you provide food and/or volunteer your time at Families Feeding Families.

We have a group of women who knit prayer shawls, blankets, and hats to give people in the hospital. We participate in Angel Tree ministry and Samaritan’s Purse at Christmas time.

We support overseas missionaries. Marsha Alexander is director of Asbury College in the Philippines. Umba and Ngoy Kalangwa serve as a district superintendent and a coordinator of Methodist schools and director of the Susannah Wesley Education and Healthcare Center in Tanzania, Africa. There’s a bulletin board in the dining room that has information about missions and opportunities to serve.

These are all examples of the practice we’re considering today—“risk-taking mission and service.”

Fruitful congregations are effective in fulfilling the mission and purpose God gives them. The mission of The United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

We fulfill this purpose as we perform the five practices with a commitment to excellence. Through *Radical Hospitality*, we reach out and offer the invitation and welcome of Christ. God shapes hearts and minds through *Passionate Worship*, creating a desire for closer relationship to Christ. Through *Intentional Faith Development*, God’s Spirit helps us grow in

grace and in the love of God and neighbor. Maturing in Christ causes us to respond to the needs of others as we discern God's call, and that leads us into *Risk-Taking Mission and Service*. As we continue to grow in grace, we place more of what we are and have under the lordship of Christ, practicing *Extravagant Generosity*.

If this is the way United Methodist churches fulfill our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ, then how are we doing? Are we faithfully and fruitfully allowing God to work through us to make a difference in people's lives? (Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* 132).

Mission and Service refers to the projects, efforts, and work people do to make a positive difference in the lives of others for the purposes of Christ, whether or not they'll ever become part of the community of faith.

Risk-taking pushes us out of our comfort zone, stretches us beyond service to people we already know, and exposes us to people, situations, and needs that we wouldn't ordinarily encounter apart from our deliberate intention to serve Christ.

Risk-taking Mission and Service includes working to relieve suffering and to challenge injustice. It seeks to improve the condition of others in the name of Christ (Schnase, *Cultivating Fruitfulness* 61).

Of course, the mission and ministry of Jesus are at the heart of why we serve and seek to be in mission. In Luke 4, we see an example of Jesus' ministry and his own understanding of his mission. In his hometown synagogue, Jesus reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. The passage he reads tells about the Servant of the Lord who is anointed by the Spirit of the Lord. This anointing empowers the Servant to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. That likely refers to the year of Jubilee when slaves were set free, lost property was restored, and God's people celebrated their liberty.

After reading this, Jesus tells the people, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Jesus himself is the anointed Servant and Son of God who does all of those wonderful things for people. This passage is Jesus' mission statement. It describes and summarizes his ministry. And it gives hope to all who are poor, captive, blind and oppressed.

Another important thing to note is that the “today” Jesus speaks of continues. It’s still “today.” Jesus continues the ministry he began then. What he said then, he says to us. What he did for people then, he does for us. And if we’ll hear Jesus’ Good News and receive his ministry, we become part of that ministry. The Church is anointed with the Spirit to minister as Jesus did. When we put our faith in Jesus, we receive the Holy Spirit. We become the anointed community of the Messiah. We are the Body of Christ.

The Good News Jesus proclaimed is for us and it becomes our message to share. The freedom, healing, and release Jesus brought are for us and we’re empowered by God’s Spirit to bring freedom, healing, and release to others.

In the new era that Jesus ushers in, the poor receive good news, the prisoners hear a message of freedom, the blind are given sight, and the oppressed are released from their oppression. Luke most likely intends us to understand these various groups literally—the economically poor, those wasting away in actual prison cells, the physically blind and the weaker, less influential people who are abused and walked on and exploited by those with more power and resources. This includes anyone who lacks status in society. Jesus ministered to such people. And the Church is called to join him in that ministry.

We don’t want to hurry past this physical understanding of Jesus’ ministry. But Luke also intends us to understand it holistically. What Jesus says here applies spiritually also. The poor in spirit, the prisoners of sin and destructive habits, the spiritually blind and oppressed also need to hear the Good News and be set free.

As you read on in this chapter, you’ll see that the people in Nazareth rejected Jesus and even tried to kill him. That’s a foreshadowing of the final rejection and execution of Jesus by the leaders and the people in Jerusalem. It’s also a foreshadowing of the experience of many who follow Jesus. We call this *risk-taking* mission and service because we’re disciples of the one who said, “Lose your life for my sake. Deny yourself. Take up your cross and follow me.”

The opposite of risk-taking is safe, predictable, comfortable, certain, convenient, fearful. I get tired of being cautious and mild when it comes to

serving God. Jesus gives us an example of boldness and he calls us to be bold as we follow him and serve him and reach out to others.

I recently read an outstanding book called *Strong and Weak* by Andy Crouch. He says that to flourish we need both authority and vulnerability in our lives. Authority is the capacity for meaningful action (35). Vulnerability is exposure to meaningful risk (40). As an example, he tells about a woman named Isabel, who was born in Chile, where she trained and credentialed as a family counselor. She married an American and they moved to Santa Barbara. Isabel discovered that her professional credentials from Chile weren't recognized in the U.S. Her husband struggled to find steady work, but she eventually was able to find full-time work cleaning houses.

The Santa Barbara hills are full of spacious homes and nearly every one employs a Hispanic woman as a cleaner. That was Isabel's work and she could see it reflecting God's work. Here's how she says it:

If you look at the book of Genesis, in the beginning, the world is full of darkness. There is no order. God is a God of order—he orders every single life, changes every life from darkness to light in Jesus. And that is my motivation as I work. Everything I do is from God, not from man. Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, and we are to do the same: be a servant with love. If I am cleaning a toilet—well, that is something that needs to be done to order the world and wash the feet of others. There is no sadness about that; it's a joy. The greatest example of servanthood in my life is the Holy Spirit, because he guides me. I listen to his voice, and I say, "Yes, sir."

Not only does she see her work as ministry, but she looks for opportunities to minister more explicitly to people. She says,

It's sad to see people who have everything beautiful, everything perfect. They contract with you so their world can continue perfect and clean. But you realize that their life is empty. So I have to be a light for them. Every single home I go to, I pray for that family, that

they can find him. If he will use me, amen. If not, amen—he will send somebody else.

When Isabel isn't working or caring for her own family, she volunteers with a center called Immigrant Hope that serves other women from Latin America. She teaches classes that help them prepare for driver's license exams and the tests required for U.S. citizenship.

The Lord Jesus is teaching me that we are all immigrants and our real home is with him. So we should be showing others his love and mercy, and how much he loves those whose lives are broken. By addressing very practical needs, we show them the one who makes everything new. (Crouch 68-70)

What would you be willing to risk, where would you be willing to go, who would you be willing to talk to or to help in order to follow Jesus, to show gratitude to our Lord, to touch and bless people that God loves? We all need to keep asking ourselves those questions and asking God to help us answer them.