

Do the Impossible
February 23, 2014
Matthew 25:31-46

Our reading from the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew is a challenging passage. It is a story that invites our response.

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'

And the king will answer them, "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.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'

Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, "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.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

May God bless the reading and the hearing of these words.

Let us pray. Help us to consider stepping outside of our comfort zones to make a difference by serving all people. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

Texas was my home from birth until I moved to Florida in 2007. After so many years in one place, my adjustments were many: from big city to small town, from a stable annual population to a community that swells several months each year, and from weather worries centered on tornadoes to those focused on hurricanes.

Within days of arriving, I had several conversations about hurricanes and learned that I had arrived right in the middle of something known as hurricane season. Since I started my time here living in a high-rise condo on the beach, I paid close attention to those who offered tips on being prepared.

I heard many stories of storms past, including Wilma, Charlie, and Donna. I started paying more attention to weather news than I ever had before. If bad weather was forecast somewhere in the world, I was among those in the know.

Less than a year after I arrived in Florida, Hurricane Ike hit the Texas Gulf Coast. A few months later, I found myself helping lead a mission trip unlike anything I had ever participated in. It was an amazing experience of Risk-Taking Mission and Service.

That phrase is one I don't use lightly.

- It is one of the five practices of fruitful congregations.
- It is the guiding theme for today's worship service.
- It is a challenge we are called to live into together as a community of faith.

Robert Schnase¹, a United Methodist Bishop and the author of a book about the five practices, explains it this way:

Vibrant, fruitful, growing congregations practice Risk-Taking Mission and Service. Risk-Taking Mission and Service 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 a part of the community of faith.²

¹ "About Robert Schnase." <<http://fivepractices.org/robert-schnase/>>

² Robert Schnase. *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (2011), p.83.

In his description he lists some of the many different ways churches practice Risk-Taking Mission and Service, including

- sending work teams to other countries,
- helping closer to home with clean up and reconstruction work following hurricanes or tornadoes,
- making a difference in their local community through serving in after-school programs for children, visiting mature adults who would otherwise be alone, staffing food banks and soup kitchens, and helping shape public policy.³

My trip to Texas made his list. It was one focused on helping with the recovery effort, especially so that people could return to their homes.

Over the years I have led many mission trips. Most have been limited to energetic teenagers and adult chaperones. This trip, however, was something different. It was an intentionally intergeneration effort that involved retirees, middle aged adults, as well as high school and college students working together side by side.

Our journey of togetherness started with a cross country trip in packed 15 passenger vans. It is amazing what you can learn about your traveling companions during a 22 or 23 hour drive.

Many perhaps even most mission trips take participants outside of their privileged world into areas where the standards of living are much lower. This trip wasn't one of those. This trip was uncomfortably close to home.

Our rebuilding efforts involved the things you would expect:

- removing debris,
- repairing roofs,
- installing floors,
- hanging drywall, and
- meeting displaced homeowners who were hurting, but deeply appreciative of our labors of love.

Our time in Texas also included activities you might not imagine:

- a prayer walk in a rough part of town,
- jumping on a trampoline with children in front of the home they longed to return to, and
- participating in a worship service and meal with our host congregation on Thanksgiving Day.

³ Ibid.

If you knew how challenged I am with tools, then you might think the biggest risk taking experience I had was operating an electric circular saw. In reality, the biggest risk I took was in saying yes to a trip that was planned more quickly than seemed possible and funded by faith as much or more than it was by finances.

This is one time I am so glad I said yes to a risky proposition. It is also exactly what churches need to do on a regular basis as they seek to emphasize Risk-Taking Mission and Service. It must become the norm rather than an exception worth noting.

Creating this sort of culture means not just supporting church sponsored projects, but also encouraging, celebrating and appreciating the service church folks do in the wider community through affiliated ministries as well as so many other caring organizations.⁴

Today our Mission Moment focused on our congregation's #1 mission: the Bargain Basket. I am proud to say that more of you volunteer there than at any other place on the island. In fact, it takes around 80 volunteers from our church and the wider community to make this ministry possible.

For many of you the original decision to get involved included stepping outside of your comfort zone. Whether or not the first step was challenging, your faithfulness in returning to serve again and again allows us to keep our labor costs quite low. This means that we are able to offer reasonably priced merchandise and generate monies to expand our reach through mission giving to organizations like Grace Place, Bedtime Bundles, Shelter for Abused Women and Children, St. Matthew's House, Harry Chapin Food Bank, and oh so many more.

I can't help but give thanks for all the mission and service work done by the members and friends of the United Church. I also can't help but return to the call of the fruitful practice – it is a practice that involves the word risk.

While talking about helping is important, we cannot stop there. If we do, we miss the point. All talk and no action leads to many unmet needs.

⁴ Ibid., p.97

An anonymous piece I have seen on social media and received as a forward by e-mail puts that possibility this way:

- I was hungry and you formed a humanities club to discuss my hunger.
- I was imprisoned and you went to your chapel to pray for my release.
- I was naked and you debated the morality of my appearance.
- I was sick and you knelt and thanked God for your health.
- I was homeless and you delivered a sermon of the shelter of God's love.
- I was lonely and you left me alone to attend church.
- You seem so close to God; but I am still very hungry, and lonely, and cold.⁵

That is a world that we cannot help create. Our response to the needs surrounding us must begin now.

Whatever you choose to do:

Don't be risk averse.

Don't simply sit still.

Put your faith into action.

Engage in Risk-Taking Mission and Service.

Amen.

⁵ Various versions can easily be found online, including <<http://www.marysoutherland.com/files/Compassion.pdf>>