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Sermon Series:
“Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations:
IV. The Practice of Risk-Taking Mission and Service”

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4th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

February 2, 2014

Luke 6:32-36; Matthew 25:31-40

Our series, taken from the book by Robert Schnase titled *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, continues with the practice of risk-taking mission and service. In the book, Schnase suggests that specific elements of faith practices in congregations create and sustain a vitality that keeps them steadily growing in depth, in breadth, and in service to others. Thus far in the series, we have looked at “radical hospitality,” “passionate worship,” and “intentional faith development.”

Radical hospitality in a community of faith focuses on the needs of visitors to the church rather than focusing primarily on the needs of those already participating. Such hospitality graciously welcomes and provides for guests in the life of the congregation in ways that exceed a mere greeting. It anticipates and engages the needs of others and joyfully focuses on their comfort rather than on its own comfort.

Passionate worship is a gathered community of faith where the encounter with God that takes place in worship orients the church to the critical issues of life. Something significant is at stake, and worship provides an alternate perspective to the one provided by culture and economics and politics. Whether it is two or three

gathered together, or two- or three-hundred, the presence of Jesus Christ in our midst makes the ordinary significant.

Intentional faith development recognizes that discipleship does not end with baptism or with a profession of faith—it begins there. Following Jesus Christ is a life-long endeavor because we are always struggling to make our lives congruent with Jesus’ proclamation, his practices, his manner of life, his call to involvement in this world. We never stop growing, we never stop learning. Life itself becomes the classroom where faith pushes us to be engaged more deeply.

Today we address the fourth practice: *risk-taking mission and service*. Mission and service are outward expressions of faith. Robert Schnase in his book asserts that when churches maintain primarily an inward focus, or “turn inward, using all resources for their own survival and caring only for their own people, then spiritual vitality wanes” (p. 83).

Conversely, he asserts that when the church works to make a positive difference in the lives of others outside the church, lives inside and outside the church are changed. Something happens when the faith community builds relationships, extends care to those in need, engages in hands-on projects and efforts.

Those in need are changed. Adequate housing, medical care, clean water, education, business and farming practices—all of these provide opportunity to improve the lives of those to whom the church reaches out.

Mission participants are changed. The lives of church members are expanded as they see true-to-life conditions of those whose lives are vastly different from their own. They may learn from the remarkable courage of others who live life impoverished in things but rich in hope and faith and love. Participants in such mission experience the difference that can be made in the lives of others by their own small contribution, and catch a glimpse of what Christ is calling the church to do and to be.

Churches are changed. The vision caught by those who participate can infect an entire congregation. Focus shifts from what a church wants for itself to what the

church can provide others who have crying deficits in the most basic of human needs for survival. Budget priorities shift. Programming in the congregation may refocus toward cultural awareness of others different than what is typical in the congregation. The church's reason for being may become broader and more open.

The primary scripture text which guides our reflection on risk-taking mission and service is found in Matthew 25. I believe most of us are familiar with this passage. Jesus is teaching about the last judgment and the qualities of life which characterize those who are judged.

Matthew 25 provides an opportunity for the preacher to deliver a scathing hell, fire and brimstone message to sinners seated in the pews this morning. I hope you are up for it. It's important for the goats to know that they are goats and not sheep, and what they have coming to them. And since I am the preacher, I get to target the people I think are goats. Those of you seated on my right, this is your lucky day! Too bad for those of you seated to my left.

The Day of Judgment frequently is addressed in the manner in which I have just cast it. It is a message of fear and condemnation; it is a way for the speaker to manipulate the listener. Or it is not taken seriously—it's a joke. Those typical approaches complicate a proper understanding of Matthew 25 and Jesus' reference to a last judgment.

When you look at all the Gospels and their portraying of Jesus' message, you will see it was only on rare occasions that Jesus spoke in terms of judgment. And judgment, when spoken of at all, was typically directed to insiders of the faith.

Jesus seemed well aware of the everyday hell in which most of the people of his time found themselves. The task of Jesus' earthly ministry was not one of telling folks how despicable they were and how deserving of condemnation.

He brought *good* news: deliverance from self-condemnation and the tyranny of legalism; he proclaimed forgiveness of sin, renewal of life and hope, and strength for service to God and neighbor. The fact that Jesus rarely spoke in terms of

judgment and punishment should strike a cautionary note for people of the faith about their speaking of judgment.

The reality of this passage is that Jesus directs it, not to outsiders, not to unbelievers, but to people of faith. He was teaching his disciples about the kingdom of heaven. In a series of parables, Jesus described both the faithful and the unfaithful in God's kingdom. And he concluded with the story we read today about the last judgment. It is a story full of surprises.

One surprise is how clueless the sheep, the insiders, were about what they had done. The righteous of God say, "When, Lord, did we see you hungry and feed you? When did we do all of these things?" They are completely unaware. That shocks me. I remember every good thing I have done. My scrapbook has them recorded, and when God says "I was hungry and you fed me," I'll say, "I know; I've got a picture of it right here on page 25."

But they didn't know. Isn't that curious. They did not recognize God in the people they served. They seem unaware that their actions were serving the purposes of God. For them, the work of God didn't come in scrapbook moments or grand events. Instead, it was found in the seemingly insignificant encounters of life, the ones that never showed up on the radar screen.

When someone was hungry, they just took the time from their busy schedule to make sure she had something to eat. When word came of illness, they merely went by to check on him. It was nothing extraordinary; it was a small thing. The surprise is that the small things done for those most insignificant loom large in God's reckoning.

The church must remain humble in its assessment of how "good we are doing." We really don't know. Typical ways of measuring our performance don't work in God's Kingdom. A book with the title *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help, and How to Reverse It* by Robert D. Lupton details some of the downsides to people and organizations doing good things. It is an eye-opening and insightful read.

This congregation has a well-deserved reputation for engaging mission in Durham. “Downtown by history and by choice” is often the way it is articulated, as FPC focuses on the needs of an inner city dominated by poverty, homelessness, and hunger.

Some of our accomplishments:

- A five-star-rated Day School provides care for children of working parents of all income levels.
- The leadership of this congregation has been instrumental in the founding and development and spin-off of many social ministry programs that focus on justice and compassion.
- This congregation has resourced and financially contributed to the most significant efforts to address human needs.

I hope you will continue this legacy in the years ahead.

What I see as a challenge to this congregation is for individuals to move from organizational and financial support of these efforts to personal, hands-on involvement. It is there where the risks to us may seem the greatest.

We engage risk-taking mission and service when we are stretched beyond our comfort zone; when we attempt something that has the potential for failure or rejection; when our actions may elicit resistance to help the help we bring, perhaps a lack of gratitude. We engage risk-taking mission and service when we discover our own neediness and poverty in what we thought was our self-sufficiency.

Another challenge the church faces is to engage the very real needs of people and to not forget that those needs include spiritual and religious dimensions. At times, the mission of the church can appear as only one of many social and community service agencies. The task of the church is to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And preaching the gospel as Jesus did it encompassed more than the speaking of words. It has to do with the power of presence and solidarity with others. Francis of Assisi said, “Preach the Gospel, and if necessary use words.”

Personally, I would rather see a sermon than preach one. People will take our words with a grain of salt until they see embodied in our lives the reality of those words. If you have any doubt about that, just ask your children.

We must integrate our actions with our words and with our presence in such a way that we are not manipulative and that our help is not conditional. The dignity and freedom of each person needs to be recognized. They are not a number or a condition or a case. They are human beings whom God created and loves.

Another surprise we find in Matthew 25 is the criteria on which judgment is based. Look at what are NOT criteria in God's rendering: membership in a particular church is not listed; meeting minimum moral standards are unmentioned; gender preference or financial acumen or mastery of knowledge doesn't show up. All the standards that human beings typically embrace are absent.

Instead, blessing or curse is determined on the basis of relationship and interaction with other human beings. Specifically named are those with the greatest need who are also the easiest to ignore: the hungry who need sustenance, the stranger who needs friendship, the naked who need protection, the sick and imprisoned who need caring attention.

Still another surprise is the disclosure of God in the presence of these needy ones. "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." The almighty God identifies himself with the weakest and most vulnerable.

Why this continues to catch us by surprise, I do not know. The Apostle Paul affirmed that Christ's death on the cross appears foolish and weak, and that God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, and what is weak in the world to shame the strong.

This story of Jesus about the last judgment was not meant to frighten or manipulate his followers. It was meant to surprise and re-orient them to a new way of looking at God's world. C. S. Lewis has written, "We may ignore but we can no where evade the presence of God. The world is crowded with Him. He walks everywhere incognito. And the incognito is not always hard to penetrate; the real labor is to

remember, to attend; in fact to come awake. Still more, to remain awake.” Looking at God and God’s world differently requires us to look differently at people around us.

A great challenge for the church is to see people as they really are, to see them as God sees them. Jesus calls his disciples to see in each person a new reality: to see the hidden Christ who died for all; to honor and value and nurture the unique creation that each person is; to love in such a way that outer circumstance of condition or need or age does not diminish the preciousness of the one who embodies Christ to us.

Robert Schnase writes in his book: “The stretch of Christian discipleship is to love those for whom it is not automatic, easy, common, or accepted. To love those who do not think like us or live like us, and to express respect, compassion, and mercy to those we do not know and may never be able to repay us” (p. 88).

That is the command of Christ we hear in Luke 6: “Love your enemies, do good and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

The risk-taking nature of such an endeavor is that we encounter uncertainty in terms of its outcome. We may fail. The results may be different than we predicted or expected.

Our assumptions may be challenged and proven wrong. We may be stretched out of our comfort zone, beyond the circle of relationships and living conditions to which we have grown accustomed. We may experience resistance and rejection, a lack of gratitude by those benefiting from our mission. We may find how small we have been and how much more we can become. We may discover our own great neediness and the opportunity to seek help for ourselves.

What we will most certainly find is that we, along with those whom we serve, that all of us are in need of God’s grace and care and love.

Schnase poses a question to any person and congregation that is serious about following Jesus Christ: “What have we done in the last six months to make a positive difference in the lives of others that we would not have done if it were not for our relationship to Christ?”

We may find it helpful personally, as well as institutionally, to ask that question in shorter time frames. “What have I done in the last 3 months, last week, yesterday?” “Who might I encounter today that together we may share the wonderful reality of God’s grace and love?”

Durham is changing, and the immediate area around First Presbyterian is changing as well. Downtown is going through a renaissance and re-gentrification. We applaud that! However, statistics on poverty do not indicate that poor neighbors who used to live next door have moved up in their standard of living; they have merely been moved out and displaced. We are losing the war on poverty.

What does that mean to us at the crossroads of Roxboro and Main for the future of mission and service? What might God be calling this congregation to become and to do next?

Primary resource and reference:

Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, Robert Schnase, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2007