

“Risk-Taking Mission and Service”

Matthew 25:31-40

I once attended a wedding at which the Pastor delivered a short sermon about the nature of marriage. While I don't remember everything he said, one thing stood out: He repeatedly emphasized that marriage is **risky business**. Marriage is risky, he said, because it requires trust and forgiveness, mutual service, patience, commitment and vulnerability. Since hearing that sermon, I've come to realize that it isn't only marriage that is risky business. Any true, deep, meaningful relationship is going to be risky. All authentic relationships require love, patience, forgiveness, service and trust. For our relationships to be truly deep and significant we must be committed to other people, and be willing to make ourselves vulnerable to them. Otherwise, we wind up withholding our real selves from the relationship, and it becomes shallow or false. This is certainly true of our human relationships, and it is also true of our relationship with God. In fact, today's reading shows us that the two go hand-in-hand. If we are to have an authentic relationship with God, we need to have authentic relationships with one another, and all of that is risky business. What makes our relationships so risky is the fact that they require us to serve one other. We are called to make ourselves vulnerable for the sake of helping people.

Let's be clear about this: **Service to others is essential** if we want to follow Jesus. You might recall that Jesus once told his disciples that he came “not to be served but to serve,” that the greatest among them would be a servant to all, and that they were to imitate his humility in serving others just like he did when he washed his disciples feet at the last supper. From start to finish, our faith is about service. In today's reading, we see that the quality of our lives and faith is determined by how we have or have not served others. Lately I've taken to watching a TV show called “Restaurant Impossible” in which British chef named Robert Irvine is given two days and \$10,000 to take a failing restaurant, remake its image and its menu and put them on the road to success. In one episode, he brought a busload of people to one failing restaurant to determine how bad it really was. It turned out that, while the menu was huge, they had very few of the actual ingredients on hand and could not serve most of their menu items. Would you want to go to a restaurant like that? A restaurant without food? I know I wouldn't. Their menu was false advertising. Imagine, then, a church that claims to follow Jesus, but takes few risks, if any, to serve other people. Imagine a Christian whose life revolves around his or her own concerns, and takes no significant action to help people in need. Talk about false advertising! To be a church, to be a follower of Jesus, is to take the risk of serving people in need. If we don't serve others, we are misrepresenting Jesus and should not call ourselves Christians.

Service is risky. Notice how today's reading shows that **true service is costly**. Jesus commends people for giving of themselves to help others: they give people food, clothing, and something to drink. They risk showing hospitality to strangers. They make the time and go to the effort required to help people who are sick. They go prisons and visit the inmates. Service costs money and time. It requires effort. It takes courage. It is risky. You can't serve without taking risks and paying a price. There have been a couple instances in my ministry when I've been called upon to visit people in jail. These weren't even serious prisons, but just juvenile detention facilities. And yet, I have never been more uncomfortable in my life. Just getting

through security was nerve-wracking for me. It turns out that the guards in these places are rather stern and serious, and that kind of frightened me. Then, being brought into the area where the prisoners were housed, I felt completely vulnerable. Maybe they would riot? Maybe I'd get shivved! It was hard to focus on my reason for being there, because I was just plain scared. But then, as I sat face-to-face with one young man who had called for my help, I realized how badly damaged he was, and how much he needed to be cared for and guided. I then felt a sense of peace and purpose, and was able to be present for him, even though I still didn't like being in that place. Whenever we serve others, it will call us to do things that are uncomfortable and risky, but the only way to truly help people in need is to make ourselves vulnerable. We can't fully engage in service to others from a safe distance!

Most importantly, note what Jesus says to those who served other people. "What you did for them, you did for me!" **When we serve others, we serve God.** There are many things in the Bible that you can take metaphorically or symbolically, but I don't think this is one of them. Even as we call Jesus the Son of God, notice how he talks about those who are suffering and in need as "members of my family". In other translations he calls them his brothers and sisters. That is, we are all God's children, and Jesus identifies with us so closely that our suffering is his suffering. And when God's children are suffering, God suffers with them. If you are a parent, you should get this. There is nothing that good parents care more about than their children, and if you mess with their kids, they take it very personally. I may not be the calmest person in the universe, but I seldom totally lose my cool and yell at someone. Well, there was one occasion when I was working with the youth group at one of my previous churches and the kids were painting the youth room. They were dipping their hands in paint, and putting their handprints on the wall. One of the kids, who was no stranger to trouble, walked up behind my daughter Aria, hands dripping with paint, and acted like he was going to put his paint covered hands on her hair. I saw this and quickly said, "No. Stop it." But he continued to move in on her. He may have been joking. But with him, you could never tell. I totally lost it. I literally screamed at him to get away from my daughter – and ordered him to never, ever touch her or get near her. I raised my hands with the clear implication that if he didn't back off I would make him do so. That stopped him. Now, I'm not proud of that moment. I'm sure there was a more pastoral approach I could have taken. But in that moment it didn't matter, because it was my child who was being threatened. When someone mistreats your children, you take it personally. In the same way, when someone shows love and kindness to your children, and helps or protects them, you feel profoundly grateful to them. I think this is what Jesus is getting at here. We are all children of God, and when we help each other we are serving God in a very intimate, personal way. On the other hand, if we fail to help, or do actual harm, it grieves God more than we can imagine.

The topic in our devotional readings and small groups this week is **risk - taking mission and service.** I'd like to suggest that this is the **next big thing** for us as a congregation. We are a fairly typical, comfortable, suburban congregation, which means that we don't, as a whole, seem to have a great passion for mission and service. Yes, we do some good things in service to others, and I am not discounting those things or the efforts of those who are involved in them. But are we as a congregation fully invested in taking risks to help other people? Do we see mission as central to our identity? Or are we more preoccupied with our own needs and desires, content to see ministry with people in need as a peripheral concern? This much I

can tell you: the quality of our relationship with God is judged first and foremost by the way we serve others. The story of the sheep and the goats, and the teachings of Jesus in general, can lead to no other conclusion but that risk-taking service must take a central place in the life of anyone claiming to be Christian. My prayer for our church is that we will come to embrace mission on a whole new level, and start seeing risk-taking service as a defining characteristic of our life together. As people who claim to follow Jesus, how can we do any less?