

“FRUITFUL: Risk-Taking Mission and Service”

James 1:19-27 • Luke 10:25-37

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • July 11, 2021

On January 8th, 1956, missionaries Jim Elliot, Pete Fleming, Nate Saint, Ed McCully, and Roger Youderian were murdered by members of the Waorani Tribe in Ecuador. Elliot, who was twenty eight years old, had been working as a missionary in Ecuador for nearly four years and the five young men were trying to take the Gospel to this remote tribe that had a long history of violence.

The missionaries began their efforts with the Waorani by flying over and dropping friendship gifts from the plane, calling out with a loudspeaker, “we are your friends. We like you.” Before long they decided to try a “bucket drop.” This was a technique that Nate Saint, the pilot, had developed. He would fly the plane in a tight circle and they would lower a bucket with gifts on the end of a rope. When enough rope had been let out the bucket would essentially hover in one spot as the plane flew in circles.

The Waorani understood that these gifts were intended for them and they began returning gifts in the bucket – things like a feather headdress, smoked monkey and even a live parrot. After making 13 of these weekly gift drops, the team decided it was time to make personal contact. They located a sandbar in the river about 650 long where they were able to land the plane and after several trips they set up camp. Three days later they finally made their first contact with a man and two women. They were able to speak with them and even gave the man a ride in the plane.

On the afternoon of Sunday, January 8th, Nate Saint was flying into the camp and spotted a group of about ten of the natives headed in their direction. He radioed his wife back at the base camp that it looked like they would finally get their chance to share the Gospel and that he would check in at 4:30. He never got that chance. These missionaries left behind five young widows and nine young children who would grow up without their fathers.

Over the last few weeks we’ve been looking at these five practices of fruitful congregations and today we are talking about risk-taking mission and service. I suspect that for many of us, when we think about risk-taking mission, stories like that of Jim Elliot come to mind. The early missionaries to places like China, Korea, and India often found themselves in the middle of civil wars. They often faced incredible hardships and overwhelming loss, burying their spouses and children in those distant lands.

Remember, though, that we are talking about practices of fruitful congregations. Most of us will never go into full-time long-term missions in dangerous locations. Some of you might be called to that but that’s not what we’re talking about today. God is calling each of us, all of us as a church, to participate in risk-taking mission and service. So it seems to me that the first thing we need to do is define what we mean by missions. In the broadest sense, the mission of the church is to help people to meet Jesus Christ and learn to follow Him. We say our mission is “To Know Christ and to make Christ known.” From the time Jesus called his disciples He has been sending them, and us, to proclaim the Kingdom of God.

The pattern for this sending is, in fact, God’s very nature. The Father sent the Son into the world. That’s the Mission of God. Jesus’ birth is evidence of the sending nature of God. Since Jesus’ ascension after His resurrection, the task of the Church has been to participate in the mission of God. That’s something we must never forget. It’s not our mission, it’s Christ’s mission. We’re not able to save people; only Jesus can save them.

So what *is* our role in missions? The local church is best understood as a mission outpost, called to be a community of disciples of Jesus present in the community, sharing the gospel and ministering to the needs of people, which is exactly what we find in our two Scripture

readings today. A lawyer comes to test Jesus, basically trying to trap him, and asks what he thinks is the most important commandment. The religious lawyers of the day would spend hours arguing about how to rank all of the commandments in the law. Jesus says the most important commandment is that we are to love God and love our neighbors. So the lawyer presses him and says, “who is my neighbor?”

Jesus answers by telling the parable of the good Samaritan. To the religious leaders this was an offensive story. To them there was no such thing as a good Samaritan. They were defective Jews. Jesus says that a man was walking alone on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was attacked, robbed, beaten and left for dead. At this point the people hearing the story are all thinking, “of course he was. That’s what happens when you walk at way alone.” Jesus then tells them that a priest was walking on the road and when he saw the beaten man he walked on the other side of the road. Then a Levite—the Levites were another sect of priests—a Levite also came along and did the same thing. Who could blame them. Remember, it’s a dangerous road.

But then comes the twist. Jesus says that a Samaritan comes along and sees the man and has compassion on him. He cleans up his wounds, puts him on his animal and takes him to an inn to recover. He then pays the innkeeper two days’ worth of wages to take care of the man and promises to pay any other expenses. The point of Jesus’ parable is that *we* are to be like the Samaritan.

James 1 reminds us that we are to not just be hearers of God’s Word but we are to be doers. We are to be people of action, serving others. James says, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” Jesus himself said, “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.” You and I should have the same attitude. We need to see the needs in our community and love the people enough to do something about them. As Robert Schnase

says, “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 part of the community of faith.” He then says that it’s so important that churches be engaged in this kind of serving that “When congregations turn inward, using all resources for their own survival and caring only for their own people, then spiritual vitality wanes and the mission of Christ suffers.”

This is not really new ground for us. We know we are called to serve our community. We just finished a successful diaper drive for the pregnancy center, one of our mission partners. But what does it mean to be risk-taking? This is where we will be most challenged today. Risk-Taking Mission and Service doesn’t necessarily mean dangerous. It doesn’t mean we are being called to life-threatening missions. It’s scarier than that.

What are the risks we face if we do mission in the way of Jesus? Let me share four possible risks with you. I’m sure there are others. First, when we serve others we risk failing. Ministry is always unpredictable. When we serve people in our community we often won’t know if we are making a real difference. Second, we risk rejection. Loving and serving our neighbors is really about building relationships with them. We don’t want to do ministry *to* people, we want to do ministry *with* them. That means being vulnerable and sometimes we will experience rejection. Those of you who have been involved with ministries like Young Life will understand what I mean.

The third risk we face is closely related to the risk of rejection. We will risk broken hearts. We may experience the broken heart of failure or rejection. But also the more you serve, the more you see the needs. Your heart will break for the things that break God’s heart. There’s one more risk you face when you serve. You risk being changed. This is a good risk. You risk becoming dissatisfied with comfort as

you become more like Christ and see the world as He sees it.

So what should we do? How do we go about Risk-Taking Mission and Service? I think the key is to see that it is God calling you to step out of your comfort zone, to stretch your faith by serving. That means that He will also be there as you serve. You can start by finding ways to serve your church. Get involved in one of the ministry committees. We already have a

committee for each of the practices of fruitful congregations we've discussed so far. Ask God where He's calling you to serve. And then begin to look at our community with God's eyes. Where are the needs? How can we come alongside people to help them flourish? Together we can make a difference by living to know Christ and to make Christ known.

Amen.