

“Fruit of the Spirit: Risk-Taking Mission and Service”

Luke 6: 1-11; 31-36

There is a lot going on in this text. I started off by reading two stories about what are acceptable practices for the Sabbath and then skipped ahead a bit to an excerpt from Luke’s version of the Sermon on the Plain in which Jesus tells us to do unto others as we would have them do unto us.

Either part of today’s Scripture would be enough for us to talk about Risk-Taking Mission and Service. We can see in each piece of our Scripture texts that Jesus takes a risk by providing healing and wholeness for someone else. In the first Sabbath story, Jesus defends his disciples’ behavior, reminding all that rules and regulations don’t usually matter to someone when they are hungry. No one is going to listen and accept reasons that explain away or make it okay for them to be hungry if their stomachs are growling too loudly to even hear those reasons being explained to them. Sometimes the rules and regulations need to be broken to serve a child of God. That’s the first story.

Then in the second Sabbath story, we see Jesus talking with the Pharisees and Scribes in the Temple. During their conversations, he notices someone whose hand is withered. Jesus takes a risk once again in this instance. He notices someone

that others would rather ignore. Jesus defies rules and regulations once again to bring new life to someone regardless of the fact that his actions are stirring the pot and upsetting the powers that be.

Surely, it would have been enough for the preacher to have just mentioned one of these Sabbath stories for us to begin our conversation about Risk-Taking Mission and service. But no, this crazy preacher of ours had to go on reading Scripture, adding to the conversation, mudding the issue. Almost to the point, where we want to say, Preacher, we get it! You want us to take some risks. You want us to step out of our comfort zones. You want us to do some new and different things as the people of God.

Well, yes. I'm not going to lie and say that I don't want us to do all those things. In fact, I think I have said multiple times from this very pulpit, we, myself included, please hear me say that, that we as the people of God need to step out of comfort zones, to take some risks with our faith. We need to do some new and different things. Like I said, I'm not going to lie. If that is all we take from this sermon, I'll be pretty happy.

But you know, what would make me even happier, and I know that everyone's concern is about keeping me happy, please hear the sarcasm in my voice, but if you are truly asking, what would make me even happier as the

preacher today would be if we all, myself included didn't limit these risks of faith to just one incident, to just one experience. What would make me even happier, is if we, myself included, began taking risks, getting out of our comfort zones, trying new and different things, if these things became the way we operated and lived out our faith as people of faith all the time.

Let me explain: Like I said earlier, it may be hard to figure out what these stories of Sabbath and the Sermon on the Plain have in common at first glance. But when we step back and see the larger picture, we see and understand that what connects these stories, what ties them together is Jesus.

Jesus is the key to understanding and interpreting these stories. These stories and so many others remind us that Jesus took risks. Jesus came out of his comfort zone. Jesus did new and different things not once but throughout his whole ministry. Each and every day, Jesus practiced risk-taking mission and service in his ministry. Every interaction he had with other people involved some element of him stepping out of his comfort zone, some element of doing new and different things.

Think about it. When Jesus was invited to a dinner, he would say, "Sure, I'll be there. But can I invite a few friends? You know, my disciples, also a few tax collectors, a few prostitutes, maybe a few people who are poor, a few people who have leprosy or various other diseases. And if you as the host are okay with me

inviting all those people, how about I invite all those other people we would just rather ignore? I think they needed to be invited as well. When someone invited Jesus to dinner, that host invited all the children of God to the table.

Many times after Jesus did this, the host would say “Okay” because it would have been rude to say otherwise. I mean as the host, what are you going to do? Tell Jesus no? Who is really going to be that person, that says out loud, “No, please Jesus, I don’t want all those types of people at my table.

Okay, I get the irony here. Maybe what I should say is no one is going to say those words out loud. But rather, we just come up with a different reason as to why some people are invited to the table. We simply tell the others, “Sorry, it just wouldn’t be good table manners if we crowded our guests who are already at the Table. Maybe next time, we’ll invite you, knowing that the next time will never come around.

But Jesus knew there was always room at the Table. He knew that the Table would hold more than the people who look like us, think like us, act like us. Jesus knew that the Table was able to hold and welcome all the Children of God.

All the time, Jesus was pushing the boundaries, taking risks, pulling people out of their comfort zones. In all that Jesus did, Jesus went far beyond what was

expected when it came to faithful behavior. Jesus kept expanding the Welcome to include all of God's children.

The key for us as people of faith to understanding risk taking mission and service is experiencing and learning from Jesus himself. Everything he did, everything he taught, was contrary to what society, what the church, what others considered "normal" behavior. Everything Jesus did, everything Jesus did was contrary to how we all assume the world is supposed to act and to be.

Now, I know this is the point when we all start looking for the exits. We are beginning to wonder what exactly did we signed up for when we decided to accept Jesus into our lives. This is the part, when the preacher starts talking about risk-taking, and comfort zones, this is the part when we, myself included, all began to feel a little overwhelmed. This is the part when we begin to wonder just exactly how are we supposed to practice risk-taking mission and service in all that we do as people of faith. We know the rest of Jesus' story. We know what happened to him when he pushed the powers that be a little too far. We know what happened when Jesus made everyone a little too uncomfortable with his risk taking mission and service. We know the end of the story.

Okay, first things first, breathe. And remember Jesus' story didn't end with the cross. It ended with the empty tomb. Then also remember Jesus didn't work alone. God was in the process, bringing about the resurrection. When it comes to risk taking and mission, the first thing we need to remember is who is in charge and who is really doing the work.

No one is expecting us to be Jesus. No one is expecting us to be the Savior of the world. No one is expecting us as individuals or as a single community of faith, no one is expecting us to fix all the world's problems. So take a deep breath and let go of that way of thinking.

However, I will say what is expected from us as people of faith is an understanding that we are called to do and be more. Now, once again, don't get overwhelmed. Keep breathing and hear me out.

As people of faith, we know that there is a way the world operates and the way the Kingdom of God operates. And those two ways could not be more different. The way the world operates is that there has to be insiders and outsiders. There has to be walls that separate and divide. There has to be rules and regulations that keep order. The way the world operates is based on money and power.

As people of faith, we are called to a different way, the Kingdom of God way, a way where love and grace are the standard modes of operation, a way where all are welcome, where all are invited to the Table, where all are embraced and recognized as children of God, made in the image of our Creator who has named us and claimed us as God's own. We are called to be people of the Kingdom of God who are called not just to do nice things because we are people of faith but to go beyond that. Anybody can do nice things. What we are called to do and be as the people of God is to be directly present in people's lives.

This is what Jesus did in his ministry. Jesus didn't wave from his car as he drove by the masses. He talked with them. He broke bread with them. He touched and healed them. He asked their name. Jesus was directly present in people's lives.

Time and time again, Jesus reminded his followers, and reminds us today that it is never wrong to help another. It is never wrong to minister to human need. Jesus came to show us as the people of God a way of being in the world that reflects the ways of God, the ways of love and grace, a way that reflects and reminds us that God is still working in this world, bringing about healing and wholeness for all of God's people.

Being a person of faith doesn't mean that in our faith, we live out a simple ethical system as a way to play nice with other people. Being a person of faith means practicing a love that is not limited by others' responses to us.

Jesus challenges us as his followers to demonstrate our faith by taking risks, stepping out of our comfort zones, in spite of knowing that it is dangerous work, in spite of knowing that we are going to rock a few boats. In spite of knowing that we might just make some people mad, as people of faith we are called to practice risk taking mission and service in all that we do. We do this as our mode of operation not because we are trying to be Jesus, not because we are trying to save the world. Jesus challenges us to practice risk taking mission and service as our mode of operation as people of faith because that is what God has done and continues to do for us, as God's own beloved children.

Sometimes, I think God is sitting up there, thinking, "Man, I wish I could be done with them all. All they do is fight with one another, hurt each other. All they do build walls that separate and divide."

But thankfully, God doesn't do that. God has not and God is not going to wash God's hands of us. Because the relationship with God's people is too important. The Kingdom of God being realized here on earth is too important. So each and every day, God takes the risks and invites us to be in relationship with God, not knowing what exactly the outcome will be. God only knows that the results of being in a relationship with the people of God are worth it.

Can we say the same? Do we take risks in our faith? Do we take risks when we are serving and loving others? Do we take risks as people of faith and challenge the status quo? I don't have the answers to these questions. And I'll be honest, I think I am afraid of what the answers would be if I truly asked them of myself. I know that I like living in my bubble. I like playing it safe. I like my comfort zone and get grumpy when someone encourages me to step out of it.

But then I look at the faces of my children, and I wonder what the effects of me playing it safe will be on their future? Will poverty be solved? Will hunger be eradicated? Will racism no longer exist? Once again, I'm afraid of what the answers to these questions might be if I truly asked them of myself.

I think the thing that makes all this risk taking mission and service so difficult for all of us in incorporating and practicing it in our lives as people of faith is that we struggle with competing obligations. We wonder what exactly is the right thing to do in certain situations, especially when this particular act might have us standing alone. We wonder and worry about the consequences of our actions. Will we get fired from our jobs? Will we lose our friends? What would people say about us if we speak out, and work to end the injustices of the world?

As people of faith, I think deep down, we all know the answer to that one. We only have to look at Jesus' teachings to know that one. Jesus tells us that it is

never a bad time to help another. There is never a wrong way to minister to human need. It is never not the right thing to do to bring healing and wholeness for one of God's children.

As people of faith, it is always worth the risk when we step out of comfort zone, time and time again, to help bring about the Kingdom of God for one of God's very own.

During World War II, psychologist E. Paul Torrance made a study of United States aces flying in the Pacific theater of operations. He reported that the most salient characteristic of the ace was his risk-taking ability. Throughout the ace's life, he had kept testing the limits of his abilities. And the life histories of these men that the doctor collected showed that these aces were highly resistant to accidents, and in combat they suffered fewer casualties than pilots who were inclined to play it safe. Dr. Torrance said, "Living itself is a risky business. If we spent half as much time learning how to take risks as we spend avoiding them, we wouldn't have nearly so much to fear in life."

The same thing can be said about faith. Faith is a risky business. Kingdom work is risky business. Practicing a love that is not limited by others' response to us is risky business. If we spent half as much time learning how to take risks in loving others, take risks in serving God, take risks becoming the people that God

calls us to be, if we spent half as much time learning how to take risks in being people of faith as we spend avoiding them, we wouldn't have nearly so much to fear in life. And I would also say that we wouldn't have as much joy in life either. There is something about taking risks, and discovering that God is in our midst, that God can be and is found in our neighbor. There is something to discovering a way of being that cultivates love and grace that brings so much joy and hope into our lives that we realize that the risks were worth it all along.

So today, may we leave this place, ready to take risks in our faith, not just once, but time and time again, and in doing so, may we discover the many ways that God is still working in this world to bring healing and wholeness to all of God's creation. Amen.