

Message:¹ Take a Chance for Life!

[Watch Nick Vujicic’s testimony

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l7vFvU6a8CY>]

Nick Vujicic is an amazing person. His testimony is powerful. Even more important, Nick lives the message that he speaks. For example, one of Nick’s favorite activities is swimming. He’ll get up on a diving board and dive right off – without any arms or legs! That’s taking a risk while living life to the fullest. Nick’s life is filled with risk, yet he rises above his limits to embrace God’s love in all things. That’s the way to live!

Risk-taking mission and service is one of the five essential practices of a vital congregation. Doing mission and service work isn’t just a *nice* thing for us to do. It’s more than what we *need* to do. It’s what we *must* do. It’s the very reason why God has put us here. In fact, a church will die if it isn’t doing the kind of mission and service work Jesus taught us. The church will die without mission - maybe not overnight, but it will die...slowly and surely. That’s because as all of our energies and resources turn more and more inward we gradually waste away so that the church eventually becomes merely a monument to the work and witness of those who have gone before us.

What does the Bible say about the mission and service of the church? There are a lot of Scriptures that come to mind. One that comes to mind is the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37). One day when Jesus was talking with his disciples in an assembly, “a religion scholar stood up with a question to test Jesus. ‘Teacher, what do I need to do to get eternal life?’ Jesus answered, ‘*What’s written in God’s Law? How do you interpret it?*’

The scholar said, ‘That you love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and muscle and intelligence - and that you love your neighbor as well as you do yourself.’

‘*Good answer!*’ said Jesus. ‘*Do it and you’ll live.*’

¹Some material from Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, Risk-Taking Missions Sermons, pp. 1-4

Looking for a loophole, the scholar asked, ‘And just how would you define “neighbor”?’

Jesus answered by telling a story. *‘There was once a man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. On the way he was attacked by robbers. They took his clothes, beat him up, and went off leaving him half-dead. Luckily, a priest was on his way down the same road, but when he saw him he angled across to the other side. Then a Levite - a religious man, showed up; he also avoided the injured man.*

A Samaritan traveling the road came on him. When he saw the man’s condition, his heart went out to him. He gave him first aid, disinfecting and bandaging his wounds. Then he lifted him onto his donkey, led him to an inn, and made him comfortable. In the morning he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, “Take good care of him. If it costs any more, put it on my bill - I’ll pay you on my way back.”’

Jesus said, ‘What do you think? Which of the three became a neighbor to the man attacked by robbers?’ The one who treated him kindly, the religion scholar replied. Jesus said, ‘Go and do the same.’” (Luke 10:25-37, The Message).

Most of us have heard of good samaritans. They show up, help in a radical way and leave, without looking for credit or fame. They help anyone in need, without having to be asked. That’s risk-taking love in action.

Our future depends upon risk-taking mission and service.

The church of Jesus Christ exists for the world, which means everyone. That means other people; people we don’t know and haven’t met. What can happen (and happens all too often) is that churches move from existing for the world to existing for their own sake. They see their mission not as reaching those outside the church for Jesus Christ, but as serving the membership. As important as it is for the church to care for one another, focusing inward on those who are members instead of outward on those who need to know and embrace God’s saving love is a recipe for stagnation and decline.

This leads us to a second passage, found in Matthew 25, when Jesus tells the parable of the sheep and the goats. To the sheep (those in tune with God), Jesus extends his invitation to enter into heaven, saying, *"I was hungry and you gave me food.... I was in prison and you visited me.... 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"* (Matt. 25:35,36,40). To the goats (those not in tune with God), Jesus sends them away from his presence, because *"just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me"* (Matt. 25:45).

Jesus is clear: risk-taking mission and service is part of our eternity. We're to serve others in Christ's name because our lives depend on it for all eternity. In risk-taking mission and service we bring eternity into the present for those in need. Every Sunday we pray together, *"Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."* In other words, when we gather for worship, we ask for God's will to be done so we might bring something of heaven to earth. The church brings the presence of God, something of heaven, into the lives of others through risk-taking mission and service.

What's the opposite of risk-taking? Safe. Predictable. Comfortable. Certain. Convenient. Afraid. These words don't describe the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Risk-taking mission and service reminds us that our congregation isn't the end, but the means God uses to change lives and transform the world. No one can be passive and also radical, passionate, risk-taking or extravagant. We have to shift our focus from ourselves and our needs to others and their needs.

I'm convinced the reasons the church turns inward is because we're afraid and forgetful. We aren't afraid to be in mission and service. We're afraid to be in *risk-taking* mission and service. So we hesitate or only serve when it's convenient. And, after a while, we forget our calling. Let's keep the words of Isaiah 41:10 in our heart and mind, *"do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand."* This passage has served me well since the early days of my conversion to faith. It will help you as well, if you trust God.

Recently, a man who was homeless approached me and asked if I would give him money for his water bill. It was in a public setting and I could have turned the man down easily. Instead, I decided to talk to the man. I asked him if he was thirsty. I got two cups of coffee and then asked him to follow me over to a nearby seating area. He was watchful, seeing where I was going to sit, and then he started to sit at a nearby table. I invited him to join me at my table, and with a look of surprise on his face, he accepted. As we drank our coffee, we talked.

Bill told me he was from southern California, from a broken and dysfunctional family. His parents were dead and he didn't have any immediate family. He'd been on his own on the streets for eighteen years. He usually slept in an alleyway, unless the business owners complained and then he had to scramble to find another place for a few weeks until the police stopped coming around. It was clear to me as we talked that he was articulate. I couldn't help but think of how this man's life might be different if his home-life or work-life had been different. I asked him for a copy of his water bill. And I suggested some local aid agencies that might help him get on his feet. He declined my offer and said something that made me sad: **“Nobody wants me, so I just get by.”**

Then he said something that rearranged my thinking and approach to mission and service. He said: **“You know, everyone leaves me to myself; but you sat with me, talked to me and spent time with me. I often feel very lonely, and I have gotten used to rejection and to being ignored. Thanks for your time.”** I'm not telling you this to build myself up, but to show you how God works in the present. The most important thing to this man wasn't that I filled his monetary need, but I was able to fill a few moments of his time in relationship. God touched that man through me in the same way God can, and will, use you to touch others. Bill's life was touched. He was a regular at the pantry, attended services and eventually joined the church.

Too often the church replaces risk-taking mission and service with charity. Charity is what we do for the poor and marginalized to make us feel good about ourselves. We may put aside funds in our budget to support non-profit groups, like Settlement House. We may volunteer to

feed the homeless or glean once a week. At the holidays we feature alternative Christmas and we get presents for the children of incarcerated parents. We're good "senders." Please hear me! All of this is important and good and part of what it means to be a faithful church. **But is it enough?** Giving can become a replacement for the risk-taking mission and service Jesus calls us to do. **Are we ready to actually spent time with those in need?**

Are we ready to be "goers," those who follow Jesus to places where we would rather not go? Those who are in need will take what we offer them, no matter how large or small it is. The question we must ask as followers of Jesus is this: **Are we willing to sacrifice some of our time and comfort to offer our presence in Jesus' name?** What if we didn't just invite someone to worship but picked them up and sat with them? What if we not only offer a cup of coffee in Jesus' name but give Jesus himself to someone through our presence? What if we always introduced ourselves to people who don't know on Sunday?

Genuine mission and service is risky. It forces us to be vulnerable, to step outside our comfort zone. But our lives, and the lives of others, depend upon it. As a church, when we are willing to step out and take risks in our mission and service, we will discover joy. We will be satisfied in a way that far surpasses the temporary thrill of charitable giving, because we will have discovered the everlasting adventure that is the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ!

Will you join me and serve others?

Let us pray...

"Gracious God, we have good intentions. We truly want to help those in need. We desire for all persons to come to Christ. We confess that there are times when we have used charity as a replacement for the risk-taking mission and service you have called us to do. We know that we cannot step out in mission and service without the presence and power of your Holy Spirit in our lives. So in the power of your Spirit, assist us as we move forward in our task, knowing that we, your church, don't

exist for ourselves but for others. We lift our prayer in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, the biggest risk-taker of them all. Amen.”²

Luke 10:30-37 (CEB)

Jesus replied, “A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He encountered thieves, who stripped him naked, beat him up, and left him near death. Now it just so happened that a priest was also going down the same road. When he saw the injured man, he crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way. Likewise, a Levite came by that spot, saw the injured man, and crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way. A Samaritan, who was on a journey, came to where the man was. But when he saw him, he was moved with compassion. The Samaritan went to him and bandaged his wounds, tending them with oil and wine. Then he placed the wounded man on his own donkey, took him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day, he took two full days’ worth of wages and gave them to the innkeeper. He said, ‘Take care of him, and when I return, I will pay you back for any additional costs.’ What do you think? Which one of these three was a neighbor to the man who encountered thieves?”

Then the legal expert said, “The one who demonstrated mercy toward him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

² Schnase, *Op cit.*, Teaching Guide, p. 13