

“Making a Difference”

2 Corinthians 5:17-21 ¹

This morning we complete our “first circuit of the bases,” a review of how our congregation is organized for ministry and why we’re organized as we are. While we’ll remind ourselves of this organization and purpose from time to time, I won’t generally go over it every week as we’ve done at first.

You’ll remember that we’re organized around five ministry areas, and that, according to our church Mission Statement, our shared purpose is “To be an expression of God’s love through our belief in and relationship with Jesus the Christ so that all may participate in:

WORSHIP: Experiencing God in a meaningful, spiritually-transforming way.

FELLOWSHIP: Building the bonds of the diverse family of God in love and unity.

DISCIPLESHIP: Encouraging one another to discover and obey God’s call in our lives.

MINISTRY: Meeting the needs of people in the name of Jesus Christ.

EVANGELISM: Sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ and living it out in our lives.”

We can also call these five areas **Worship, Connect, Grow, Serve, and Go.**

This morning, we come to “Home Plate,” “Evangelism,” which has to do with “Sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ and living it out in our lives.” It is this ministry of which Paul wrote in our text when he said that “*God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation*” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

So let me ask you a question that’s harder than it sounds: was Jesus out of touch with reality when He embraced lepers, protected the poor, healed the blind, welcomed children, washed His disciples’ feet, ate with outcasts, and made them the heroes of his stories? When Jesus did these things and taught us to do them, was He really showing us the way to flourishing life, or was He leading us astray?²

Yes, I know you know the “right” answer to that question, but do you really believe that that answer is really true? Could it be that “the right answer” is something we affirm on Sunday morning, while our daily choices affirm something else? While you’re pondering that, listen to these verses scattered across the Bible from Leviticus to 1 John:

- *Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge . . . but love your neighbor as yourself* (Leviticus 19:18).
- *Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow* (Isaiah 1:17).
- *He has showed you . . . what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God* (Micah 6:8).
- *“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.”* (Matthew 16:24-25).
- *“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? . . . But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back”* (Luke 6:35).
- *Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says* (James 1:22).

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on February 19, 2012.

² Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Living* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), p. 93.

- *If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?* (1 John 3:17).

That trajectory of teaching across both the Old and New Testaments seems pretty clear, doesn't it? The witness of the Bible is that God's Way, which Jesus demonstrated with uncompromising clarity, frequently involves costly demonstrations of unexpected love to persons we might ordinarily consider the least likely to receive it.³

In Bristol, I was the Chair of the Board of Directors for a non-profit called *Bristol Faith in Action*, a group that combined the benevolent efforts of about sixty Christian churches of all sorts. Last summer, that board studied a book that is bringing about seismic changes in Christian caregiving around our nation. The book is *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor . . . and Yourself*.⁴

As the book opens, its authors, Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, note that the average North American enjoys a standard of living that has been unimaginable for most of human history. We are the richest people ever to walk the face of the earth . . . while forty percent of the people on this planet survive on less than two dollars a day.⁵

Corbett and Fikkert note that although "We do not necessarily need to feel guilty about our wealth, we do need to get up every morning with a deep sense that something is terribly wrong with the world and yearn and strive to do something about it. There is simply not enough yearning and striving going on."⁶

As we consider Evangelism & Mission this morning, I want to use a term for this part of our congregational life that I got from Methodist Bishop Robert Schnase. In his best-selling book, *The Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, Bishop Schnase calls this function "Risk-Taking Mission and Service." (Just in case you're interested, those five practices are [1] Radical Hospitality; [2] Passionate Worship; [3] Intentional Faith Development; [4] Extravagant Generosity; and [5] Risk-Taking Mission & Service.)

"Service" has to do with using our gifts and talents to support the ministry of our local congregation, while "Mission" has to do with using those same gifts and talents in ministry beyond the walls of our church. "Risk-Taking Mission & Service" is where pursuing "A Life that Matters" gets traction . . . or not.

The opposite of Risk-Taking Mission and Service is mission and service that is safe, predictable, comfortable, certain, and convenient.⁷ But those words describe lives that are very different from how Jesus lived His. In fact, they're exactly the kind of thing Jesus was talking about when He told us, *For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.* (Matthew 16:25).

As we consider Risk-Taking Mission and Service, then, we begin with the recognition that "each of us is responsible to participate at some level in helping our congregation to be everything Scripture calls it to be, including fulfilling its biblical mandate to care for the poor."⁸

³ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), p. 86.

⁴ Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor . . . and Yourself*, foreword by John Perkins (Chicago: Moody, 2009).

⁵ *Helping*, pp. 13, 28.

⁶ *Helping*, pp. 13, 28.

⁷ *Congregations*, p. 100.

⁸ *Helping*, pp. 14-15.

I continue to be haunted by a quote from the Japanese Christian Toyohiko Kagawa that I first heard decades ago: “I read in a book,” he said, “that a man called Christ went about doing good. It is very disconcerting to me that I am so easily satisfied with just going about.”⁹

Kagawa’s statement has to do with the question of what you and I are doing with our lives, and the question of what we’re doing with our lives is a question about *vocation*. You and I earn our living in different ways, but we all have the same vocation, or “calling,” which is to follow Jesus.¹⁰ When Jesus calls us, one by one, by name, to follow Him and His Way, He’s calling us to a Way that will challenge us and stretch us beyond anything that we’ve previously imagined, but that also brings with it a Huge Gift that we do not at first suspect.

This Gift has to do with “vocation,” which is the heart of “A Life that Matters.” God’s call to vocation in Christ represents God’s response to our need for transcendent meaning, for a place and purpose in the cosmic order. God graciously invites us to help move the Creation toward its appointed end.¹¹

In actual practice, our Mission and Service take many shapes. The routine operations and daily ministries of a congregation require the regular involvement of members who love the church and who want to see it run smoothly and effectively. Whether in teaching on Sunday morning or in Vacation Bible School, preparing food for funeral meals and other social functions, mailing prayer cards, folding newsletters, pulling weeds, making prayer quilts, or keeping the library materials up-to-date, dozens of hours of your cheerful and helpful labor are needed every single week in order for our ordinary ministries to be accomplished. And that’s a very beautiful thing, indeed!

Not everyone has the physical stamina, the needed skills, or is at the right time in life for ministries such as mission trips to faraway place in these United States or around our world, and that’s all right. The Body of Christ has “*many members, and these members do not all have the same function*” (Romans 12:4).

At the same time, there’s always work to be done that is a little more “edgy” and “in the trenches” than these weekly in-house ministries. There’s work to be done in helping with the Coalition for Compassion, in staffing our Food Pantry, in helping with ministries to the homeless, to the homebound, at the hospital, or at the jail, with many more opportunities available than I can mention right now.

With respect to the adjective, “Risk-Taking,” Bishop Schnase wrote, “The practice of *Risk-Taking* Mission and Service pushes us out of our comfort zone and into places we would never go on our own. Those who practice Risk-Taking Mission and Service . . . voluntarily set aside their own convenience for a higher purpose. They follow Jesus into areas they would not [go by their own choice]. . . . They go where Jesus leads, even when it is uncomfortable, awkward, unexpected, and costly. They risk.”¹²

“Risk-Taking Mission and Service involves work that stretches [us], causing [us] to do something for the good of others that [we] would never have considered doing if it were not for [our] relationship with Christ and [our] desire to serve Him. . . . The stretch of Christian

⁹Epigram attributed to Toyohiko Kagawa and cited by Donald R. Heiges, *The Christian’s Calling*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 25.

¹⁰ “Vocation” is derived from the Latin *vocare* (‘to call’) and *vocatio* (‘call’ or ‘calling’).

¹¹ Mark Jensen, “A Pastoral Theological Study of Vocation,” Ph.D. dissertation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1988, p. 174.

¹² *Living*, p. 103.

discipleship is 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 who may never be able to repay us.”¹³

This is the love to which Jesus calls us, and this is a love that changes us—and those we serve—in ways from which we will never recover . . . nor do we want to. We don’t *want* to “recover” from these experiences of Christian vocation. We don’t *want* to go back to a time before we’d had such experiences, because it is by these very experiences that we attain “A Life that Matters” and “Relationships that Last.” As we follow Jesus day by day, we discover by and by that we have been given what our hearts have hungered for all along.

At the same time, the enormous need for ministries of justice and mercy that exists both here in Columbia and around the world can easily overwhelm and paralyze us into inaction. It’s much easier to see what’s broken than it is to see how to repair it. The good news is that Jesus’ call to discover our True Vocation usually comes in the shape of something nearby that claims our attention.

When I was a child, our church in Atlanta chose to become hosts to a Cuban refugee family, and the church employed the father, Mr. Perez, as our church custodian. Many adventures grew out of the cultural differences between Atlanta in the 50’s and Cuba under those worst years of Castro, with one need becoming immediately apparent: the Perez family needed to learn English.

My Mom didn’t know anything about teaching English as a Second Language (ESL), but she decided to learn. As years passed, she became expert in the Laubach Method of teaching English, and when Dad’s job moved us to Memphis in 1970, she became one of the founders of the Memphis Literacy Council in 1974.



Mom continued her literacy work in Memphis for more than thirty years, and one of the large training rooms in the Memphis Literacy Council building (it’s now called “Literacy Mid-South”) was named for her. On her 93rd birthday, a year ago this week, she wanted to visit the office to see how things were going, so we did.

A retired man opened the door for us as we entered, and she chatted up the staff, who greeted her as though they were seeing Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration. And it turned out that Mom had actually been the person who had taught the man who opened the door for us how to read.¹⁴



That fifty-year trajectory of transformed lives began when one woman saw the need of a refugee family to learn a new language and decided to do something about it. That’s exactly what Bishop Schnase was talking about when he wrote, “Followers [of Jesus] say Yes and help in small ways with a project. They [notice] the difference their work makes for others and for themselves.

“They mature and gain confidence, branch out or deepen their commitment, and with time and a pattern of consistent service, they end up somewhere totally unexpected. Their own inner maturing in Christ makes a difference in the lives of other people and transforms the world.”¹⁵

¹³ *Congregations*, p. 88.

¹⁴ See www.literacymidsouth.org.

¹⁵ *Living*, p. 99.

“Risk-Taking Mission and Service changes the lives of those who offer ministry. It changes the lives of those who receive ministry. It changes the *world* as we share directly with God in the creating and re-creating work that makes all things new. [We can] start anywhere and at any time. It is never too late. And with continued cultivation . . . the difference we make multiplies and the sense of satisfaction we experience deepens. When we answer Jesus’ call, ‘Follow me,’ there’s no predicting where we will end up!”¹⁶

“Risk-Taking Mission and Service are where courage and joy intermingle. God’s Spirit turns dentists into team leaders for Habitat for Humanity, school teachers into clinic hosts, store clerks into language tutors, accountants into Big Brothers, stay-at-home mothers into lobbyists for legislation that protects the uninsured, college professors into volunteer prison chaplains, car salesmen into cooks for mission teams, retired folks into literacy tutors, and can change you into something you cannot now imagine.”¹⁷

Are you ready for *Adventure*?

Here I Am, Lord

Words & Music by Daniel Schutte; based on Isaiah 6:8

I, the Lord of sea and sky, I have heard My people cry.
All who dwell in deepest sin My hand will save.
I who made the stars of night, I will make their darkness bright.
Who will bear My light to them? Whom shall I send?

*Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord?
I have heard You calling in the night.
I will go, Lord, if You lead me.
I will hold Your people in my heart.*

I, the Lord of snow and rain, I have borne My people’s pain.
I have wept for love of them, they turn away.
I will break their hearts of stone, give them hearts for love alone.
I will speak My word to them. Whom shall I send?

*Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord?
I have heard You calling in the night.
I will go, Lord, if You lead me.
I will hold Your people in my heart.*

I, the Lord of wind and flame, I will tend the poor and lame.
I will set a feast for them, My hand will save.
Finest bread I will provide till their hearts be satisfied.
I will give My life to them. Whom shall I send?

*Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord?
I have heard You calling in the night.
I will go, Lord, if You lead me.
I will hold Your people in my heart.*

¹⁶ *Living*, p. 101.

¹⁷ *Living*, p. 105.