

“Irresistible Influence”

(Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations: #4 Risk-Taking Mission & Service)

Matthew 5:13-16 ¹

Let me begin this morning by asking you a few questions that will require some imagination. Are you up for such a challenge? Well, here we go

1. Can you imagine our neighbors in Oakland Mills being genuinely thankful that CBF is in their neighborhood? Can you imagine them talking with each other about how good it is to have us in the village because of the tangible ways in which we’ve shown them God’s love?
2. Can you imagine the Oakland Mills Village Council and the Columbia Association being genuinely grateful that CBF is in town, and even asking for our help from time to time?
3. Can you imagine a significant number of CBFers actively engaged in and passionate about their work in the community, using their gifts and abilities in ways they never thought possible?
4. Can you imagine Oakland Mills and Columbia itself actually changing for the better because of CBF’s involvement?
5. Can you imagine people in Oakland Mills, some of whom have been cynical about and hostile toward Christian faith, actually praising God for CBF and for the positive contributions we’ve made in Jesus’ Name?
6. Can you imagine what God might be able to do and to bring about were all these things to be true? Can you imagine what **Irresistible Influence** we would be able to have for the Kingdom?²

While you’re holding those questions in your mind, I’d like you to also bring to mind the image of one of the persons whom I’m sure you’ve seen begging at various stoplights here in Columbia. I most often see them at the intersection of 175 and Dobbin Lane and they’re also usually present on Martin Luther King Boulevard in Baltimore. What kinds of thoughts go through your mind when you encounter such folk?

I don’t know the real situation of those folk any more than I suspect you do; but every time we encounter human suffering and need, we’re also presented with choices, aren’t we? Most of the time, I find myself trying to avoid eye contact with those persons, though sometimes, generally in bitter cold or in driving rain, I do make a contribution toward their need.

The calculus has to generally be made quickly. This week, I decided to contribute to a Hispanic family who presented themselves as out of work and desperate. On another occasion this week I was accosted by a disheveled man on the sidewalk and didn’t give him anything, although I later wished I had.

While I’d prefer not to have to make such decisions, to not have to be confronted with what appears to be such desperate need, I’m also aware that in those moments and in those decisions, something is happening in me as well as in them. Somehow, in all of that internal calculus, in all that avoidance and engagement, I’m becoming either more like Jesus or less like Him . . . and so are you.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship of Columbia, Maryland on June 22, 2014.

² Robert Lewis and Rob Wilkins, *The Church of Irresistible Influence: Bridge-Building Stories to Help Reach Your Community* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), pp. 13-14).

In that sense, each of these decisions is “crucial,” which literally means “in the moment of the cross.”³ While to say this doesn’t necessarily predetermine our response in a particular situation, it does remind us that following Jesus usually does move us *toward* suffering, not *away* from it.

In the first century, following Jesus meant walking into the caves of lepers, confronting violence against women, embracing neglected children, blowing the whistle on self-serving government employees, condemning the dishonest, and challenging the indifference of the wealthy toward the poor. Should we expect following Jesus today to be very different?⁴

Against the resistance of the rich and powerful, and contrary to the advice of His disciples, Jesus lifted up the blind and lame, touched the unclean and healed them, lifted the paralyzed from their beds, ate with tax-collectors in their homes, and risked the violence of the mob to intervene on behalf of a woman caught in adultery. Jesus affirmed in His teaching and demonstrated in His behavior that God’s Love involves costly expressions of unexpected love to the least likely.⁵

Alongside all these considerations, each of us in this room already has a whole world of private concerns, personal passions, family responsibilities, and work obligations. The circles in which we live, work, and play may be fairly small, but they are intense, and important . . . and they are *ours*. Why should we give precious time, money, or effort to reach beyond our own kith and kin to serve other people? And would it make any real difference, anyway?⁶

Well, here’s the deal. **If everyone thinks that nothing can be done, then nothing will be done.** Would the Civil Rights Movement have changed America, and, indeed, the world, if those who became that Movement had just looked hopelessly at each other and bent once again to their oppression? The answer to that is pretty obvious.

And the truth of the matter is that if each of us does what we can, like the little boy who gave his small lunch to Jesus,⁷ then, in ways mysterious beyond our comprehension, God multiplies our efforts, interweaves them with the work of others, and uses them to actually push back the Darkness and transform the world. And all of this is what it looks like to live *fruitfully*.⁸

As you may have guessed, our topic today is the fourth characteristic of fruitful congregations, which is **Risk-Taking Mission & Service**.⁹ Bishop Schnase, the author of the two books that inspired these sermons, pointed out that **Risk-Taking Mission and Service** involves work that stretches us, causing us to do things for the good of others that we would never have considered doing were it not for our relationship with Jesus and our desire to serve Him.¹⁰

Now it’s true that God’s call to **Risk-Taking Mission & Service** does sometimes involve what appear to us to be enormous risks. Jesus told the “rich young ruler” to “*sell everything you have*

³ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Living* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), p. 104.

⁴ Schnase, *Living*, pp. 107-108.

⁵ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), p. 86.

⁶ Schnase, *Living*, p. 87.

⁷ John 6:9. Apart from the Resurrection, this is the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels.

And only John tells us about the boy.

⁸ Schnase, *Living*, p. 97.

⁹ In our WORSHIP, CONNECT, GROW, SERVE and GO model, this characteristic is most similar to GO, or to what we call MISSION.

¹⁰ Schnase, *Congregations*, p. 88. And it’s worth asking ourselves whether we’ve done anything at all in the last six months to make a positive difference in the lives of others that we would not have done were it not for our relationship with Jesus.

and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (Luke 18:22). When Jesus called His disciples, He said to them, “Come, follow me, and I will send you out to fish for people,” and they left their businesses and their families at once and followed Him (Matthew 4:19-20).

When Jesus called my friends, Gennady and Mina Podgaisky, to serve street children in Kiev, Ukraine, the call was a lot like that. When Jesus called Mark Wakefield, whom you’ve met, to serve street boys in Huehuetenango, Guatemala, the call was a lot like that. When Jesus called David and Laurel Cheromei to serve orphans in Eldoret, Kenya, the call was a lot like that. And it could be that Jesus’ call to you will be of that sort.

At the same time, Jesus doesn’t seem to call most of us to follow Him in such ways as these. I like the way Frederick Buechner put it: “Neither the hair shirt [making life gratuitously hard on yourself] nor the soft berth [choosing a way that involves no cost at all] will do. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”¹¹ Let me say that again: **The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.**

By God’s grace, if you and I are doing what God has created us to do, if we’re doing what God has called us to do,¹² then even though the work may be difficult, we will find deep joy in the doing as we experience God’s activity in the world through us. So the questions we really need to be asking ourselves are rather like these:

1. What am I really good at doing?
2. What am I really good at doing that I find pleasure and joy in doing?
3. How might that ability be used by God to meet real needs in the world in Jesus’ Name?

Risk-Taking Mission & Service doesn’t require that we all do the same things, or even that we do what we do together. There is, after all, an “ecology of vocations”¹³ in the Body of Christ, and Paul wrote that “*God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be*” (1 Corinthians 12:18). God has given us different gifts, different abilities, and different passions so that everything gets done!

At the same time, **Risk-Taking Mission & Service** does turn us outward, both individually and together, as it reminds us that God’s compassion, grace, mercy, and love really do extend to the entire world. Risk-Taking Mission & Service calls us to deliberate efforts to improve the conditions of others; to relieve suffering; to confront injustice; to heal disease; and to assist during times of crisis, loss, or grief. Risk-Taking Mission & Service pulls us out of ourselves and connects us with real needs in the world and in the community around us.¹⁴ If God’s Kingdom is going to “come on earth as it is in heaven,” every one of us is going to have to be on board!

Although the call to Risk-Taking Mission & Service is for all of us, it’s also true that even when only a small percentage of the membership immerse themselves in significant mission and service, the texture of congregational life changes, and service and outreach begin to shape conversations and priorities.¹⁵ New and bold ministries often begin with the leadership of a few

¹¹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 95.

¹² Ephesians 2:10; 1 Corinthians 12:4-7.

¹³ James Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development and Christian Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 126.

¹⁴ Schnase, *Congregations*, p. 85; *Living*, p. 103.

¹⁵ Schnase, *Congregations*, p. 83.

people who first invite a few others to join them, perhaps involving the whole congregation as time goes by.

Vibrant, fruitful, growing congregations encourage and support those who are imaginative and adventurous in their engagement with the suffering of the world, and then they cultivate and harness their resources to support that work.¹⁶ An amazing number of women’s shelters, literacy centers, family clinics, crisis centers, schools, children’s homes, and hospitals have begun all around this planet because a handful of people in one congregation after another caught the vision of the Great Commission . . . and those whose hearts were so touched chose to allow God to work through them.¹⁷

That’s how the African Well Project got started here at CBF, and that’s how the “Help End Homelessness in Howard County” project got started in the Kittamaquindi Community down the street. I didn’t imagine or start either one of those ministries, but I’m now involved in both, as are some of you. That’s how Risk-Taking Ministry & Service grows and multiplies.

The witness of the Bible almost “from cover to cover” is that expressing God’s Love frequently involves costly demonstrations of unexpected care to persons we might ordinarily choose to overlook . . . like our neighbors begging on the street corners.¹⁸ As we saw last week, **“love is giving people what they need the most, when they deserve it the least, at great personal cost.”**¹⁹

I’ve been haunted for years by a statement Toyohiko Kagawa made several generations 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.”²⁰

Kagawa’s concern 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 many different ways, but we all have the same *vocation*, or “calling,” which is to follow Jesus.²¹ 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 yet imagined, but that also brings with it huge rewards that we do not expect or anticipate.

Let me say again that Risk-Taking Mission and Service stretches us to do things for the good of others that we would never consider doing were it not for our relationship with Jesus and our desire to serve Him. The Way of Jesus is to love those who do not think like we do or look like we do or worship as we do, and to express respect, compassion, and mercy to them, even though they will never be able to repay us.²²

This is the love to which Jesus calls us, and it is a love that changes us—and those we serve—in ways from which we will never recover . . . nor do we really want to. We don’t want to “recover” from these experiences of Risk-Taking Mission & Service. 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 experience

¹⁶ Schnase, *Congregations*, p. 91.

¹⁷ Schnase, *Congregations*, p. 92.

¹⁸ Schnase, *Congregations*, p. 86. See Micah 6:8; Proverbs 31:8-9; Luke 6:31; Proverbs 14:31; Isaiah 1:17; 1 John 3:17-18; James 1:22; Mark 8:35; Luke 6:32-33, 35-36 as representative of a much larger body of Scripture.

¹⁹ Chip Ingram, “Breaking Down Walls,” in *Marriage Built to Last*, www.rightnow.org/Media/Series/5#3

²⁰ Epigram attributed to Toyohiko Kagawa and cited by Donald R. Heiges, *The Christian’s Calling*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 25.

²¹ “Vocation” is derived from the Latin *vocare* (‘to call’) and *vocatio* (‘call’ or ‘calling’).

²² *Congregations*, p. 88.

“A Life that Matters” and “Relationships that Last.” As you and I follow Jesus into the world day after day, we discover almost without noticing it that we have been given what our hearts have hungered for all along.

Do you remember those questions with which we began?

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Risk-Taking Mission and Service are the result of a divine alchemy that turns courage and joy and obedience into significance and community and hope. God’s alchemy 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 moms into lobbyists on behalf of the uninsured, college professors into volunteer prison chaplains, car salesmen into cooks for mission teams, retired folks into literacy tutors . . . and it can change **you** into something you cannot now imagine.²³

Are you ready for Adventure?

²³ *Living*, p. 105.