

“Risk-Taking Mission and Service Abroad”

Date: October 6, 2019

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 1:8

Theme: Risk, Mission, Service

Occasion: Spiritual gifts series

Imagine with me a boy or girl standing on the side of a quiet lake. The young person picks up a stone and throws it into the middle of the tranquil water. It enters with a “ker-plop.” And the effect is immediate. Circles of waves begin to emanate from where the stone entered the water, going out in all directions. Wave after wave, the impact slowly makes its way across the top of the water.

I have *that* image in mind when I read this passage from the book of Acts. Before Jesus ascended into Heaven He promises his disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit and he commissions them to ministry. First they are to start right where they are – in Jerusalem. Then their ministry will take them to Judea, the northern part of Israel; and then to Samaria – outside the boundaries of where the average Jew would travel; and then to the ends of the earth. Can’t you just see concentric circles going out in waves?

I get a little irritated when I hear people say things like, “why are we sending aid to those foreign countries when we have needs right here at home?” Have they forgotten the words of Jesus? Yes, we are supposed to care for those close to home. And also, we are supposed to love and care for and witness to the love of Jesus – all over the world.

Many times those who say things like that aren’t even willing to help those who are close to home, telling them to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps.” So I’m inclined to think they just don’t want to help anybody. But Jesus doesn’t make it an either/or choice. He commands us to do both. Love those who are near and love those who are far away.

And so our mission and ministry begin right at home – in the family. For many people this is where they experience the love of Jesus for the first time, as parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles love on them and show them the love of Christ. Several of you are caring for elderly parents – either in their home or your own home. Some of you are caring for ailing spouses. Your ministry starts at home.

But the love of Christ doesn't stop at the doorstep of our homes. We are called to go out into the community and care for the needs of those around us. That might include visiting people in the hospital or the homebound. It might include helping at the food pantry or the homeless shelter. It could involve mentoring a youth or young adult. The possibilities of service are endless. Find where your passion and the needs of others intersect.

But the love of Christ doesn't stop in our own township or city. We know that there are needs all over the country. We could volunteer to help with disaster response, or go on short-term mission projects to places like West Virginia or Kentucky or even New York City. Risk-taking mission and ministry will stretch us and ask us to go places we may never have thought of going.

It might even involve leaving the country. Today is World Communion Sunday, and we celebrate Christians all over the world today. Do you know why we have Christians all over the world today? Because somebody left their home town and traveled to a new place to share Jesus with the people they met there. And now we have Christian communities all over the world, because somebody was willing to take the risk to leave home.

But the needs of people continue to be great. There are disasters that have destroyed entire communities. The people of Puerto Rico and the

Bahamas are still recovering from hurricanes that devastated their towns and villages. They need compassionate Christian care. United Methodists are going there on VIM trips, Volunteer in Mission.

Countries in Africa are still developing their economies, building hospitals and schools and universities to better their people. United Methodists from Western Pennsylvania have developed a very special sister-Conference relationship with Zimbabwe. And United Methodists are going there to both assist and learn from the people of Zimbabwe.

And even Lakewood members have been involved in doing international mission trips. Here this morning to talk about their experience several years ago in Paraguay is Lisa Medina (8:30)/ Margueritta Estes (11am).

Hands-on mission projects change the lives of volunteers. Nobody returns from such service and looks at his or her life in the same way. When we experience another culture and genuinely engage with the poor, it has a way of shining the light on our own culture and extravagance, consumerism, materialism and waste of abundance. We look at our own lives differently.

Countless pastors have heard their call to ministry after returning from active engagement with people during service projects. College students have changed careers because of face-to-face, hand-in-hand mission work in a culture other than their own.

The pattern of call and response is consistently familiar in the lives of those who choose to take the risks. It starts with an awareness of human need, followed by a sense that God is calling them to do something. This is usually followed by feelings of unworthiness and inadequacy.

If a person continues to pray and stay with the call, it leads to a courageous response, using spiritual gifts and material resources. It always involves overcoming resistance, opening oneself up to suffering, leading to making a difference, discovering meaning and purpose, and then inviting others.

It's not for everybody. But God does call people to risk-taking mission and ministry. We need to be willing to listen and try to determine if we are hearing God's voice correctly. It will often cause us to leave our comfort zone, and sometimes to even leave the country.

In Matthew 28, Jesus commissions his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations. To do that, someone needs to leave home. Perhaps it is you. Or perhaps you are called to support someone else who is called. On this World Communion Sunday, let us give thanks for those who heard the call and went. Amen.