

January 13, 2013

*Risky Business*

Matthew 25:31-46

**Opening Words:** I want to begin this morning with a confession. I have always felt a strange calling into the mission field. When I was in seminary there was an annual missions fair. Various mission societies would come to recruit students. I never responded because I was called to serve the local church. However, that doesn't mean I don't respect missionaries. I pray for them regularly. I still haven't ruled the mission field out. Maybe that is what I will do in my retirement? Our scripture lesson for this morning deals with missions, Matthew 25:31-46. Let me call this message *Risky Business*.

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**Matthew 25:31-46**

31"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. 32All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. 34"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 35For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

37"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you?39When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' 40"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' 41"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

44"Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

45"Then he will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' 46"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

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I begin with two stories. I love the story of Francis of Assisi, who was born wealthy and high spirited. However, he was not happy. He felt like his life was incomplete. One day he came across a beggar, who was disfigured by leprosy. He was moved by the beggar's condition. He got off his horse and wrapped his arms around him. As he looked into his face to speak, his face changed to the face of Christ himself.

I also love the story of Martin of Tours. He was both a Roman soldier and a Christian. One cold winter day, he came across a beggar. He had no money so he gave what he had. He took off his coat and tore it in half. He kept half for himself and gave the other half to the beggar. That night Martin of Tours had a dream. He saw Christ wearing his coat. A voice said, "Where did you get that coat?" Jesus replied, "I got this coat from my brother Martin."

I tell you those two simple stories to make one simple point. Jesus expects us to care for the needy of the world. It is not optional to your faith. It is vital. Responding to human need demonstrates to God we have truly been transformed by Christ.

We should care for the needy of the world as if the salvation of our souls depends on it. There is a direct connection between worship and missions. If you don't believe me, then look at this morning's scripture lesson.

Today, we find ourselves in the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew. We have looked at parables in the past. Do you remember these words? There came a time in Jesus' earthly ministry that he was no longer welcomed in the synagogue. Jesus turned to the seashore and began to use a new teaching method called parables. Parables are nothing more than sermon illustrations from daily living. They are only told to teach a single divine truth. So what is the point Jesus is trying to make in the parable of the sheep and the goats? Jesus expects us to respond to human need. We are disciples of Jesus Christ! We are saved by grace and by grace alone. We are going to heaven and we don't deserve it. If you are a person of integrity, then you want to thank God for saving your soul. Listen clearly to what I am about to say. Responding to human need is the best way to thank God for your salvation.

That is why missions are so important to the life of the church. Missions have very little to do with self and everything to do with others. Someone once said, "*The church is the only organization that exists for the benefit of others.*" So my goal today is to help you understand true missions. I will do this by making three statements. So if you are ready to explore the very heart of missions say, "**Amen!**"

### **Missions involve interpersonal relationships**

Statement number one: missions involve interpersonal relationships. Once you learn the name of a needy person everything changes. Once you get involved in their story, missions come to life. Missions are not simply charity. It is deeper. There is nothing wrong with collecting food, paper products or hats. There are many people who need them. The problem is you never get to know the person who will eat that food, use those paper products or wear the hat. Charity is fine but the needy always remain at a distance. Missions involves interpersonal relationships. If you want to thank Jesus, get involved in someone else's story.

Allan Bevere is a minister within the East Ohio Annual Conference. He is the minister of the First United Methodist Church in Cambridge. He tells the story of being in Atlanta. He was attending some continuing education event. His workshop ran late and he missed dinner. He didn't have any transportation so was forced to find a place to eat within the vicinity of his hotel. The only restaurant he could find open was a Burger King. As he walked into the "Crown Room" a homeless man stopped him and asked him for money. He was hungry. Allan didn't give him money, but he offered to buy him a meal. The two men got in line together and ordered. When they were given their plastic trays, the homeless man said, "Thanks" and turned to eat by himself. Allan decided to eat with him and followed him to a table. He admitted later it may not have been the wisest choice. The homeless man smelled. Allan said it was hard to eat at first, but then they started to talk. He asked the homeless man his name. His name was Jason. He was originally from southern Florida. He lived with his mother and sister. He hadn't seen his dad in years. His mother found a boyfriend, who lived with them. The boyfriend had abused him and his sister, so they ran. His sister moved in with her boyfriend.

He bought a bus ticket to Atlanta to make his fortune. That plan did not work and now he was living in the streets. Allan got involved in Jason's story. He offered to buy him a bus ticket back to Florida, but Jason declined. He said no one wanted him in Florida. The two men parted when the meal was over. Allan went back to his hotel room. Jason went back to the streets. But before they parted, Jason said something Allan will never forget. Jason said, "Thank you for your time." How much time do we give the needy? Missions are not just charity. Real missions mean getting involved in the lives of the needy. And when you do you will be thanking God for your salvation. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" Missions are the best way to thank God for your salvation.

### **Missions involves spiritual maturity**

Statement number two: Missions involves spiritual maturity. Spiritual babies only think about themselves. Spiritually mature people think about others. The more spiritually mature you grow, the more you discover life is really about others. No activity in the life of the church exposes spiritual maturity more than missions. Your response to missions says a great deal about your spiritual maturity. If it is true of people, then it is true of churches. If you show me a church that is not involved in missions, then I will show you a church that is on the way to extinction.

How many once proud congregations are struggling today? How many of those churches will be closed in ten years? You have heard the stories. It seemed impossible fifty years ago but it is reality today. They are closing. Why do you think they are closing? They are not closing because the buildings are ancient or the people are old. They are not closing because the people are bad or the preacher is lazy. They are not closing because of worship style or administrative structure. I don't want to sound critical, but they are closing because they are spiritually immature. At some point in their history they stopped looking outward and started looking inward. It was at that moment they stopped being part of the great Christian movement and became simply another institution holding on to the past. In other words, they decided they were more important than others. Do you believe that is the case? No activity in the life of the church exposes spiritual maturity more than missions. Spiritual babies think it is all about self. Spiritually mature people know it is about others. If you want this church to close someday, then do your best to frustrate every mission outreach in the life of this church. If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**" Missions are the best way to thank God for your salvation.

### **Missions involve risk**

Statement number three: missions involve risk. Missions are risky business. In the year 1260, Marco Polo's father and uncle traveled to Mongolia. When they arrived there, the Mongol emperor revealed an interest in Christianity. He asked the brothers to take a letter to the Pope requesting as many as 100 wise men to spread the Gospel among his subjects. It took the brothers two years to arrive home and two more years to return. Did they take the 100 priests? No. They returned with just two friars and even those two didn't make it. They returned home a short way into the journey. What a tragedy! Can you imagine how the world could have changed? The whole history of China may have been changed!

I do not know why they didn't go. Maybe they were just afraid? The church has always been filled with cowards. Have you ever noticed how many frightened people there are in the church? We are always afraid to try something new. We are afraid to try something new because we don't have the money or the people. We are afraid to try to help someone in need because we don't know them. We are afraid to get involved in someone else's life because we are afraid they may take advantage of us. Have you ever felt like the church is filled with cowards?

There are many frightened people in the church. Whenever I have gotten involved in a missions project, well-meaning people have tried to warn me. When I told people I was taking Anna on a mission trip to Mexico, some were concerned. Anna was only seven at the time. Someone said, "Aren't you afraid to take her?" I said, "Don't worry! She won't hurt them." When I got involved in Mill Creek Workcamp, people said to me, "Aren't you afraid to be in the city of Youngstown? Someone seems to be killed every day." Every time I go to Russia someone says, "Aren't you afraid? There is so much violence." I say, "I'm afraid to stay at home because America is the most violent country in the world!" I will admit it. There is a certain amount of risk in missions. Yes, the plane may go down. Yes, the food maybe bad. Yes, your bed maybe lumpy. Yes, the residents may not like Americans. Yes, you may fall in love with one of the orphans and get your heart broken. However, we must get involved in missions for the same reason the priests should have gone to Mongolia. The reward is far greater than risk. There is a world of needy people, whom God loves. How can you turn your back on them? And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" Missions are the best way to thank God for your salvation.

Ernest Henry Shackleton was born in Ireland on February 15, 1874. His father wanted him to be a doctor but he wanted to be a sailor. At the age of sixteen he joined the merchant marines and saw the world. His greatest desire was to travel to the North and South Poles. In December of 1914 he got that opportunity. He was the captain of a ship called *Endurance*, which had a crew of twenty-seven men. Most of those men were recruited from a simple newspaper advertisement. It read:

***Men wanted for hazardous journey. Small wages. Bitter cold. Long months of complete darkness. Constant danger. Safe return doubtful. Honor and recognition in case of success.***

History tells us Shackleton could not take all the men that responded to that ad. Why would so many respond to such an ad? I believe the reason is people long for an adventure. No one just wants to live and die. We long for an adventure and an opportunity to make a difference.

I believe you long for an adventure. You just don't want to live and die. You long for an adventure to make a difference in this world too. I know that is true because I long for an adventure too. I want to make a difference in this world. That is why missions cannot be ignored. It won't let us. There is an entire world out there in need. Responding to human need is not just important, it is critical. Missions are the best way to thank God for your salvation. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"