

A GENEROUS UNDERTAKING

The Six Signs Series: Risk-Taking Mission & Service

Bruce Davis

St. Andrew's United Methodist Church

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With retirement looming next spring, it has occurred to me this is my last stewardship season: that time of year clergy are supposed to be preaching commitment, most particularly financial. True to our “Live, Laugh, Love God” mantra, St. Andrew’s has leavened the season with some non-traditional presentations.

I’ve been regularly trolled by an internet watch group, ‘The Museum of Idolatry,’ (I’m not making this up), indignantly labeling such series as blasphemy! I’d have people from Russia ragging on me! And who knows; they may be right. I figure if God doesn’t have a sense of humor, I’m pretty much doomed already.

That said, I was relieved, last weekend, to see Bishop Saenz getting into “What’s The Buzz.” The bishop even shot a video with his smartphone and posted it on his episcopal Facebook page. I suppose when you’re sat through as many church announcements as he has, anything novel is bound to tickle your fancy—if indeed you have fancy to tickle.

By previous standards, BEE THE CHURCH is pretty tame. That was intentional. We’d been through the big PROJECT ZERO campaign earlier in the year and thought it would be good to go low-key this fall. So far as I can tell, having AJ Baratta buzz around is yet to get a rise out of my international following.

It’s just as well we ordered his costume when we did, as this has since occurred to me: We might have put AJ in one of these old Carmen Miranda fruit hats. Such would have been entirely fitting with the book that inspired this series, Bishop Robert Schnase’s highly influential “Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations.”

Fruitfulness—and lack thereof—was a big deal to Jesus, as recorded in this teaching, Gospel of John, Chapter 15, verses 1-8:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

Which is to say, there are consequences... I'm just reporting. Reading on:

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish and it will be done for you. My father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”

As to Bishop Schnase’s “Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations,” these are:

- Radical Hospitality
- Passionate Worship
- Intentional Faith Development
- Risk Taking Mission and Service
- Extravagant Generosity

This being “Risk Taking Mission & Service” Weekend, we now turn to the Bible’s original risk-taking missionary, Paul of Tarsus, and his correspondence with the church in Corinth. The New Testament includes two letters from Paul to the Corinthians; reading from the first, Chapter 16, verses 1-4.

Now concerning the collection for the saints: You should follow the directions I gave the church in Galatia. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come. And when I arrive, I will send any whom you approve with letters to take your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me.

The financial practice of the Galatians, commended by Paul to the Corinthians, surely informs the economic model of the original Methodist, John Wesley: ‘Earn all you can; Save all you can; Give all you can.’ It still works!

Turn then to Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, chapter 8, starting at verse 1:

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.

Pause here. There was a time when I dreaded stewardship season. Talking about money does not come natural to me at all. But maybe twenty-five years ago, I was sitting in a finance committee meeting and one of the congregants said something I’ve never forgotten: Christian giving isn’t about the church’s need to receive, it’s about the Christians need to give.

This is certainly the faith of the Bible. In the passage just read, the believers in Macedonia have experienced great joy in generosity. Likewise, Paul will advise the Corinthians, “Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.” Look at the joy of those Macedonians! (2 Corinthians 9:6)

Back to Chapter 8:

For, as I can testify they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints—and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you.

A word about this Titus. In the PROJECT ZERO campaign, we were blessed by the guidance of a ‘consultant,’ Buddy Miller. Titus seems to have served a similar purpose in Corinth. As noted in The Big Reveal a few weeks past, PROJECT ZERO is off to a bang-up start, an excellent beginning; and I know you’ll be intentional, over the next 2 ½ years, about bringing this generous undertaking to completion.

Note, the Macedonians “gave voluntarily.” Like Proud Mary’s people on the river, they were “happy to give”—and the giving made them happy.

By contrast, down in the Jerusalem church, there wasn’t anything ‘voluntary’ about it. Converts were expected to surrender their possessions to the apostles, who then distributed the proceeds according to need. As we shall see, that hadn’t necessarily worked out so well.

St. Andrew’s operates out of Paul’s model, as set forth in 2nd Corinthians: “Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver”—yet another reason for running cheerful campaigns. Finishing off the reading from chapter 8:

Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. (2 Corinthians 8:1)

The “generous undertaking” being the aforementioned “collection for the saints.” Here’s what that’s about...

Having been commissioned to Share the Gospel of Jesus Christ in Asia Minor, Paul came back to the District Office in Antioch with a surprising report. He had set up shop in the synagogues of the peninsula, toward the end of reaching his fellow Jews with the Good News of Jesus; alas the Jews of Asia Minor had about as much use for Paul as the curators at the Museum of Idolatry have for me: BLASPHEMER!

While that was a disappointment, this was WAY encouraging: Paul’s message had found surprising receptivity among the Gentiles. In the Bible, everyone who’s not a Jew is a Gentile. Paul’s report: The fields of the Gentiles are ripe for harvest.

This was met with lukewarm response at the District Office. You got to understand: Pretty much everyone on the ground floor of the Jesus movement was a Jew. Jesus was a Jew; the varsity apostles were all Jews; Paul himself was a Jew. The guys in the District Office would have been Jews.

This first generation of leadership seems to have conceived their movement as Judaism + Jesus. The guys in Antioch were ambivalent at best about bringing Gentiles into the picture. *Ah, maybe it's okay—so long as they first buy into the Jewish law-- including...da da... male circumcision! So next time you go out, Paul, take a flint knife with you....*

Paul was appalled. Talk about a deal breaker. Imagine if we asked would-be members, “Will you support St. Andrew’s with your Prayers, Presence, Gifts and Service, and undergo surgery?” Paul hustled down to the home office in Jerusalem to make his case in front of the executive board, headed at this point by Jesus’ brother James. Simon Peter sided with Paul, so did James, noting that Paul and others of the team had “risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ.” So who are we to second guess them? Per Paul’s account, as shared with the

aforementioned Galatians, the home office “asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which I was actually eager to do.”

While in Jerusalem, Paul had seen first-hand the poverty of the home church. The city was in a perpetual state of political unrest, often flaring into violence. First Church was overwhelmed by the needs of vulnerable folks who had nowhere else to turn, famine and persecution adding to the crisis.

In the 10:00 hour last weekend, Bishop Saenz spoke of having been moved by the plight of folks who’d had their lives blown away by Hurricane Harvey. Wanting to do something to help, he went to a hardware store, bought a couple of plastic buckets, and filled them with supplies such as laundry detergent, trash bags, work gloves, etc. The bishop invited congregations across Kansas and Nebraska to join him, and what had started with two buckets wound up with thousands collected, including some forty assembled here at St. Andrew’s as part of this Generous Undertaking.

FYI: No relief organization has received higher marks in these recent crises than the United Methodist Committee On Relief. Every dollar given to UMCOR goes directly to the alleviation of suffering. What about the organizational costs themselves? These are underwritten by the congregations of the United Methodist connectional system, built into local church budgets. Which is to say: what you put in the plate here at St. Andrew’s is part of generous undertakings reaching way beyond 15050 W. Maple Street.

The United Methodist “Mission Map” reminds us that St. Andrew’s is part of a world church. Via our tithes and offerings, Saints of Andrew are participating in generous undertakings across the globe.

Likewise, moved by the plight of the Jerusalem Church, determined to something, Paul appealed to the congregations of Asia Minor, inviting the predominately Gentile believers to give of their resources to alleviate the suffering of their Jewish

brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. Quoting F.V. Filson in “The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible”:

For Paul such aid was not only a work of mercy, but also a means by which the Jewish and Gentile Christians could be brought closer together in sympathy and friendship.

This, too, may have entered into Paul’s equation, at least as far as the church in Corinth was concerned: Maybe thinking about the needs of others would turn them from fussing among themselves.

Paul had come to Corinth in what is remembered as his Second Missionary Journey. His ministry to the Gentiles having been greenlighted by the home office, he set off across Asia Minor, this time into Macedonia and Greece. The Greek city of Corinth was a particularly hard row to hoe. We’re told his co-religionists at the synagogue “opposed and reviled him.” On the edge of bailing out, he had another of his visions from the Lord, this one telling him not to give up on Corinth:

“Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people.”

So Paul went back to work, sharing the gospel with those who would receive it, forming these into a church before setting off for new fields of soul harvest.

It bummed him mightily to hear subsequent reports that the church in Corinth was fracturing along lines of class, doctrine, most of all personality, some building themselves up by tearing him down.

For what it’s worth, I don’t know of a pastor who hasn’t been stung occasionally trying to BEE THE CHURCH. If you’re allergic to such, you’re in the wrong line of work.

It’s interesting that he tells the Corinthians they should imitate the church in Galatia. You might read that and think the Galatians had it all together. You would be wrong. While the

Galatians were clearly doing some things right, they had issues, too. Every church does. Perhaps the single most intemperate verse in Paul's voluminous correspondence is aimed at folks causing dissension in the Galatian congregation (5:12): "I wish those who unsettle you would mutilate themselves." Paul actually uses a more descriptive term, but this being a family-friendly gathering, I shan't go there...

But this same letter to the Galatians includes one of most instructive passages in all the Bible about BEING the church. Reading from chapter 5, starting at verse 16: Live by the Spirit, I say...

Paul proceeds to a laundry list of what he calls the "works of the flesh," including enmities, strife, jealousy, quarrels, dissensions, factions, etc. T'aint no fruit on this tree.

In contrast, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

Not that Paul himself necessarily embodied all of these, but at least he knew a live branch from a dead one. As such are surely the "fruits" of healthy congregations, I invite you repeat the passage with me, toward the end of writing it on your heart:

**The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience,
kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-
control.**

I've asked Kristin to reprise a melody heard here earlier this fall, adapted from Andrew Lloyd Webber's "Unexpected Song."

I have never felt like this
The Spirit within me
Through ministry to others
In the sharing of myself
I have felt as one with
My sisters and my brothers

Now no matter where I am
No matter what I do

I see Christ's face appearing
 Like an unexpected song
 An unexpected song
 I hear our angel cheering

In St. Matthew 25
The Lord said as you do
Unto the least of these
For the sick and for the stranger
Feeding the hungry
You are doing unto me

Now no matter where I am
No matter what I do
I see Christ's face appearing
Like an expected song
An unexpected song
I hear our angel cheering

Reading from the Book of James:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?

FYI: On this 500th anniversary of the Reformation, it is worth noting that Martin Luther, who was in fact into salvation by faith alone, came near to editing James out of the New Testament; but the book has been particularly dear to Methodists, so we continue:

If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

We've been through the Open Door
Served in North Omaha
Peru and Nicaragua

**Monthly missions in our city
Reaching round the world
A school in Guatemala**

**Now no matter where I am
No matter what I do
I see Christ's face appearing
Like an unexpected song
An unexpected song
I hear our angel cheering**

**Like an unexpected song
An unexpected song
I hear our angel cheering**

St. Andrew's is deeply invested in good works, finding joy in the doing; the pictures just seen telling only a fraction of the story. Here's one from Trunk or Treat. As is so often the case, an evening of "Live, Laugh, Love God" was fused with generous undertaking, collecting canned goods for the Living Hope Food Pantry. This was not a one-off, either. Year around, we're among the primary contributors, if not the primary contributor to the Living Hope Food Pantry. Bryan and Sue Faye took the food collected at Trunk or Treat to Living Hope and reported it took twenty minutes to unload the car.

Likewise, good works are annually imbedded into Harvest Boutique, Marsha Eurek reporting that this year's harvest included some 6,500 dollars raised for such diverse undertakings as Bless Our Schools, UMCOR, the Literacy Council—and the list goes on. As Marsha says, "Not bad for one day's work."

I see our new Men's Ministry is involved in a generous Christmas undertaking to benefit the young people of the Victory Boxing Club.

At the entrance to the Family Life Center today, you'll see Alex Orlich's Eagle Scout Project is yet another blessing of our local schools.

Today's Communion offering will go to the aforementioned Heart Ministry Center Christmas Toy Drive.

One more: Halloween being on Tuesday, staff-folks decided they wanted to dress up for staff meeting. Sheila Coleman went with an aviatrix theme, explaining this represents her commitment to getting programming for the new Children's Ministry Center off the ground.

The Mission of St. Andrew's writ large is To Share The Gospel of Jesus Christ; PROJECT ZERO is about Sharing the Gospel with the children. We've known from the get-go that would be some risk involved here. But if the aviators of another generation had been risk-averse, they would never have taken flight in the first place.

The passage read earlier surely applies to congregations: "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously." As to new ministries that will be enabled by the Children's Ministry Center, we're very much in the sowing stage, trusting the effort will, in due time, bear abundant fruit. And if there wasn't some risk involved—perhaps some short-term pain for long-term gain—it wouldn't be faith, would it?

By the grace of the vine grower, this will be the fruit of our generous undertaking

In an act of breath-taking risk-taking, Paul decides to personally deliver the offerings of the Gentile congregations to the saints in Jerusalem. Well aware of the risk involved, he was nevertheless determined to complete his mission. His reputation as a blasphemer having preceded him, Paul's presence in Jerusalem created a riot. He was put into protective custody and was never again a free man. But even then—especially then—Paul lived by the Spirit, corresponding with the churches through the letters that make up the bulk of what we know as the New Testament.

As noted, the pledge cards are in the mail. I invite you to personally bring your to St. Andrew's two weekends from now,

for prayer and consecration. Thank you for your participation in the generous undertaking that is St. Andrew's United Methodist Church.

Let us stand for the Great Thanksgiving....