

Sunday 15 February 2009
Peace Church, Munich

Sermon 4 of a 5-part Series from Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations by Robert Schnase
With readings from Leviticus 19:2-3 & 17-18 and Luke 4:16-20 & 28-30

Risk-Taking Mission and Service

Good morning brothers and sisters. I heard two fascinating stories about the same place this week that I would like to share with you. The first is a story that many of you have heard about before, but the second is one I had never heard. And so I would like to share with you two stories about Liberia.

On Tuesday evening of last week, Peace Church and Friedenskirche welcomed Frido Kinkolenge, a Methodist missionary in Liberia for a special evening. Many of you may remember our Kids Helping Kids project a few years ago, where the children and teens played a drama of Frido starting a home in Liberia to teach former child soldiers how to play again. The kids told about families where there were no more parents and kids as young as 10 or 11 years old were given dangerous weapons by the warring rebel parties in Liberia. Founded as a colony by freed slaves from the United States in the 1820s, Liberia was always home to many ethnic groups. And as is often the case when many different people claim the same land, the history of Liberia includes many government coups, civil wars and crimes against the people, especially the children.

Frido told us about the United Nations attempting to disarm the children following the last civil war, which ended in 2003. The UN troops came in and offered US dollars for every weapon retrieved. However, these children who were now rich by Liberian standards did not have any homes or family to return to. Many were adopted by other families, who often just wanted to get their hands on the money, while others were left in UN camps for displaced people.

A generation of angry, self-surviving, hardened children was robbed of their homes and families, and so the Methodist church responded with a Missionary of Hope. Frido was asked to open a center, the Brighter Future Childrens Rescue Center, and on its first opening day in 2004, over 200 former child soldiers flooded the center. They came to learn, to play, to eat – they came to make friends and heal their wounds of war. Most of all, they came for a sense of family and love. Frido showed us many beautiful pictures of the boys and girls he has helped in the past 5 years. He told many lovely stories about their development and healing. But he also talked about the extremely hard work he and his family and team have poured into the lives of these kids. I was struck almost to tears when someone asked Frido where he was from – with that much passion for the Liberian children and their futures, I

had just assumed he was Liberian. But when he said he brought his wife and daughter over from Congo for this mission, I knew exactly what the Bible meant about the Good Samaritan. Frido was from an entirely different place, but he entered a country under extremely risky circumstances and began pouring out God's love on a generation of children who were his neighbors, his brothers and sisters in Christ.

(pause)

The second story came as an email from Reiner just a few days later. It is about a new documentary film which tells the story of Leymah Gbowee, a Liberian woman who had a crazy dream in 2003. In this dream, someone urged her to organize the women of her Lutheran church to pray for peace. You will remember that the latest civil war was raging in 2003. With both sides backed by external forces, the children were armed and people were dying by the tens of thousands, from starvation, rape, gunshots or fire. The face of God was nowhere to be seen, and all were filled with fear.

But this dream gave Leymah hope. It gave hope to her and to her sisters – first her Lutheran sisters, then other Christian sisters, and finally even the Muslim sisters. Across racial, ethnic and religious lines, these women began praying fervently for peace. Of course, there was some fear at first when Muslims joined hands with Christians – would such an alliance dilute either faith? Can I trust those who are different from me? Can we pray together, even if we pray differently, for the same goal?

In the end, though, the chaos and killing had become so extreme, that all of the ladies put their religious differences aside to pray for peace. But they did not stop with prayer. They began protesting, demonstrating, shouting, singing and chanting in the marketplaces, working to join people together to fight for peace. They became known as the Liberian Mass Action for Peace.

And when they refused to be silent, their calls for reconciliation coincided with international efforts to begin peace negotiations. When peace talks between the President and the rebel forces looked as if they were about to break down, Leymah and around 200 other women staged a sit-in at the site of the talks in Ghana to demand that both sides remain at the table until a peace agreement was found.

Three years later, peaceful democratic elections were held and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf was sworn in during January 2006 as the first woman ever elected president of an African country. The collective conscience, the prayers of many women and people throughout Liberia and the world had been

heard. What started as a crazy dream in the midst of a dark and hopeless war for Leymah Gbowee, grew into a risk-taking mission, which blossomed into something amazing for her country.

(pause)

Both of these stories, extremely moving in their own ways, are stories about bold Christians, ready to face ridicule, failure and danger to stand up for God's call in their lives. Frido could have remained happy in Congo, a well-educated man with a bright future. Leymah could have remained in her home, praying quietly for peace while not attracting any attention. But God called them to do more. In fact, he calls each and every one of us to do more – in our own lives and in our own ways.

We can look at the gospel reading for today for an example of the call to risk-taking mission and service. Jesus had begun his ministry, he had gained a small group of followers and rumors about him were spreading through the countryside like wildfire. Who was this strange man with healing powers? Who was this man who turned water into wine and baptized sinners in the river? When he returned to visit his mother in Nazareth and accompanied her to the Synagogue, he could have sat quietly. And when chosen to read, he could have chosen a much less controversial text.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

But no, Jesus was never a man who never chose the easy way – he dined on simple meals with prostitutes and tax collectors when he could have enjoyed fancy dinners with renowned scholars. He slept under the stars and ate what was given to him. He refused to run his father's carpentry shop and make a nice cozy home in Nazareth. He returned to his hometown to claim his birthright as the one sent by the Lord to turn the world upside down. His words filled the people in the synagogue with rage and they chased him out of town.

Jesus did not set the example that many Christians seem to follow today. In churches all across the world today, many people seem to believe that Jesus came to save those that are like them. They prefer to speak to people who are from their hometowns or countries, work in similar jobs, pray in similar ways. They feel comfortable with people who enjoy the music they enjoy, the kind of church service they enjoy. It seems as if many Christians today have forgotten Jesus' example of risk-taking mission and service, preferring to leave the “dirty work” of putting aside their own prejudices to

someone else. Bishop Robert Schnase describes this phenomenon in his book Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations. He says, (pick up book and read)

This is the fourth of a five-part sermon series focusing on Schnase's book and its implications for our church and our world. Over the past 3 Sundays, we have learned about Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, and Intentional Faith Development. And so we come today to Risk-taking Mission and Service, the "hands and feet" of our faith. Schnase describes this aspect as "the projects, the efforts and work people do to make a positive difference in the lives of others for the purposes of Christ." (pg 83) So what does he mean exactly? Must we all move to a war-torn country to set up homes for children or start prayer rallies for peace?

Those are certainly examples of such efforts, but there are many other efforts we can make in our daily lives which may be just as risky and just as useful for Gods' purposes. For example, welcoming a new visitor who looks different from you or comes from a different place. Offering to help a foreigner understand the German systems for immigration, taxes and employment. Having a cup of tea after the service with someone you have never seen before. Praying for those whom you do not understand or particularly like. Visiting a local prison to create a worship service or writing letters to prisoners. Helping care for the babies or children during church services. These are all examples from the daily life of Peace Church, and for many people, these examples are ministries far outside their comfort zones. Taking part in some of these activities "stretches us beyond the circle of relationships and practices that routinely define" (pg 87) our daily lives and the way that we experience worship.

For me, accepting Pastor Christine's offer to join the Lay Pastor Training seminar was a step outside of my comfort zone. I grew up in a Baptist church where women led music and men led worship. It was only men who were asked to pray publically or speak at the pulpit. I don't know if you think it looks easy for me now or not, but the first time I stood at this lectern, I had to take many deep breaths to stop my voice from trembling. I had always loved public speaking, but preaching – letting you in on the intimate thoughts I have about God and his Plan and his Word – that was something entirely different. I felt so inadequate – I sometimes feel so unworthy – to stand in this pulpit and speak to you on Sunday mornings.

But risk-taking mission and service does not only change the lives of those who receive the help. Certainly, many visitors to Peace Church are touched by your kindness and many children in Liberia have hope for a future due in part to Frido and Leymah. But Bishop Schnase also tells us that, "hands-on... projects change the lives of volunteers. Nobody returns from such service and looks at his or her

own life in the same way.” (pg 82) So in the giving of your time and talents for God’s purposes, you also receive many blessings, including insights into your own culture, wisdom about other people or cultures and a growing awareness of God’s love and connectedness in the world. We are not going through this world alone, no matter how lonely or depressed we may feel at times. God clearly chooses to use us and others to help make his love known and felt in our world today.

Thirdly and finally, Schnase claims that “mission initiatives change churches... the texture of church life changes... tolerance increases, youth programs evolve beyond parties (into service) and ministries become focused on changing lives and making a difference for the purposes of Christ... God strengthens the Body of Christ through mission and service.” We can see examples in our own church family. Once a group of strangers, some from warring nations or displaced by poverty and famine, some here for a short period to work or study, some from the local area who seek a loving, diverse place to worship – once a group of strangers, inside this building, as members of this Body, we become one in Christ. We join together on Sunday mornings, Tuesday mornings, Thursday evenings – whenever we have the chance, we come together to pray and sing and remember that God’s love is not just for us or for those who look and talk and act like us. God’s love is universal. This love and his call to risk-taking mission and service “moves us beyond our comfort zone and presses us to follow Christ into more adventurous encounters with people.” (pg 88) Bishop Schnase asks us all to think about the effect our intimate relationship with Christ has on the way we treat others and ourselves.

For we can only love our neighbors as ourselves when we first learn to love ourselves. Many people carry a burden of sin, guilt or failure around with them. But God does not see us in this way. When we confess our wrongs to him, then he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. In God’s eyes, we join him in faith and fellowship – so why do we so often turn around and pick back up those burdens to carry? Why can’t we stop punishing ourselves, when we know and believe that God has long since forgiven and forgotten our failures?

Only when we learn to love ourselves, to care for ourselves and appreciate ourselves as the imperfect result of God’s perfect design, only then are we capable of having a relationship with Christ; with trusting in God’s love and His plan for our lives. And through His love, may we learn also to love and serve our neighbors. For Schnase reminds us that it is not enough to “merely lift up those who suffer in prayer, asking God to do for us what God has created us to do for him.” (pg 100) Like the good Samaritan, God is calling each one of us today to look beyond what is safe, predictable, comfortable, certain and convenient. He is calling us all to a ministry like Jesus – a life dedicated to risk-taking mission and service. We should start today by thinking about our own contribution, “What

have we done in the last six months to make a positive difference in the lives of others that we would not have done if it were not for our relationship to Christ?" (pg 88)

(pause)

Dear Lord, as we ponder this question, we ask that you open our hearts and minds, allow your love to fill us, allow your vision of a world filled with peace and joy to flood us with light. And show us the ways, in the coming weeks, that we may put feet to our faith, that we may put hands to our hearts. That we may do something a little bit crazy or a little bit uncomfortable as an answer to your call. Remind us to love ourselves and to love our neighbors, knowing that the power of prayer combined with the power of service can truly change our world. Thank you for your loving mercy and grace. Amen.