

“Wisdom Takes Risks”

Sermon: Year B, Pentecost 13, Proper 15, Lectionary 20

Texts: Proverbs 9:1–6, Ephesians 5:15–20

Preached: August 19, 2018 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, Illinois

Grace and peace to you from the God who calls us both to wisdom and to risk-taking. AMEN.

There’s a story told about a management consultant who was leading a seminar on risk-taking and decision-making. She asked for a volunteer from the audience. She said to the man, “Suppose I put a 40-foot steel I-beam on the floor here. Would you walk it for \$20?” The man said of course he would. The speaker continued, “And what if I took this same I-beam and suspended it between two buildings, 50 stories above the street. Now would you walk it for \$20?” This time the man quickly responded, “No way!” “How about \$100?” she offered. Still no way. Then the woman went a step further. She said, “Now suppose I’m on top of one of the skyscrapers, and I’ve got one of your kids, and I’m dangling him over the edge. I say to you, ‘If you don’t walk that beam and get your kid, I’m going to drop him.’ Then would you walk across that I-beam?” The man from the audience hesitated just slightly, then said, “Which kid have you got?”

Everything we do in life carries some kind of risk, because everything we do requires something of us. But there are varying degrees of risk, aren’t there? We constantly evaluate our actions, consciously or unconsciously, and make decisions about how we will react based on the risk involved. For most of us, those decisions tend toward the safe and the comfortable, things that are not going to demand too much of us, things that don’t carry the high price of giving too much of ourselves, too much of our time, too much of our energy, too much of our resources, too much of our emotions, We like to be safe, we like our routine.

But the way of Jesus is not the way of security and ease and comfort. The way of Jesus is the way of the cross. The way of Jesus is the way of dying to ourselves, the way of offering ourselves up for the life of the world, the way of bending down as servants to wash our neighbor’s feet. Scripture from the very first pages links love of God to love of neighbor, and calls us to acts of service, justice, and mercy. We are commanded to give justice to the weak and the orphan. Through the prophets, we hear, “God has told you, O mortal, what is good;” and each week we have been singing the response to that pronouncement: “what does YHWH require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness; and to walk humbly with your God?” Jesus’ stories, teachings, and parables repeatedly and consistently point toward God’s love for the poor, the sick and the handicapped, the marginalized, the stranger, the widow and orphan, and all those most vulnerable to the oppressions of society and the systems of this world. Service to those in need is a non-negotiable item, as far as Jesus is concerned.

The early church took this deeply to heart. One of the church’s first concerns was a daily distribution of food for widows. They actually went out and sold their property to finance that ministry. Talk about risk taking! As the church grew, they became known, famously and infamously, for their care for widows, for orphans, for the handicapped, for the sick. In fact, it was one of the main reasons the church thrived and expanded, not only because those they aided were drawn into the life of Christian community, but because those of greater means were so blown away by the love they saw being demonstrated in action that they wanted to be part of it, too.

And today, those congregations that thrive and bear fruit in the world are those that go beyond *ordinary* service to practice *risk-taking* mission and service for others. Bp. Robert Schnase, in *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, says, “Risk-taking mission and service is one of the fundamental activities of church life that is so critical that failure to practice it in some form results in a deterioration of the church’s vitality and ability to make disciples of Jesus Christ. When churches turn inward, using all their resources for their own survival and caring only for their own people, then spiritual vitality wanes.” He goes on to ask a diagnostic question: “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?”

Immanuel is a congregation that has a heart for service to neighbors. There are many, many things we do to aid those in need. Month after month, we prepare wonderful meals for hungry neighbors through Café Immanuel. We open our doors for the Farmers’ Market, and through that ministry help establish justice for farmers and encourage earth stewardship, and also send thousands of dollars in grants to hunger organizations. We help prepare meals for the Soup Kitchen and Hilda’s Place, and support local ministries for neighbors who are homeless. We gather supplies and funds for school children. We create and send out mountains of quilts for refugees and those in need. The list goes on and on...and I don’t mean to leave out anyone’s acts of service. In a few weeks we’ll join forces with our Lutheran and Catholic sisters and brothers and go out to serve our neighbors through God’s Work, Our Hands. Thank God for your faithfulness in mission and service!

But what could happen if we took it up a notch, if we went up on our level of *risk* in serving others? What could happen if we allowed ourselves to be led into a passionate, *risky* mission that took us beyond our comfort zone as far as whom we serve and how we serve them? I did my parish internship at Luther Place Memorial Church in DC. Luther Place was for a century a very genteel congregation, five blocks from the White House. It was a “white glove” church, with three sets of china and two sterling coffee sets for coffee hour, and a lounge with a fireplace where the ladies would gather for teas with little sandwiches. But then the neighborhood around them began to deteriorate. The congregation began to decline as people felt less secure about parking and walking through streets now lined with homeless folks and with prostitutes on the street corners. The church was holding on, but barely. Then came the riots after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The neighborhood was set ablaze. A group of rioters was heading toward the church, ready to set fire to it. And the pastor did a bold and risky thing. Braving the wrath of the council president, who was also the church’s insurance agent, he threw open the doors of the church building, and invited folks displaced from their homes by the burning to come in and sleep on the pews. And the building was saved. But many in the congregation were outraged. This was a level of risk that many were unwilling to tolerate. Membership fell sharply. The pastor ended up having a nervous collapse from the pressure, and resigned.

A new pastor came, who had a firebreathing passion for the poor and the homeless. Rather than quietly lead the congregation to close and disperse, he challenged them to take a risk. He challenged them to go out into the streets and begin serving homeless neighbors. Within a short time, they realized that the need was bigger than their resources, so they decided to focus their service. They took as their mission serving homeless women, those most overlooked by available services. With their finances in disarray, they looked to the block of buildings directly across the street, a group of rowhouses the church owned. Some argued they should turn it into a parking lot so they could attract new members. But instead of taking the comfortable way, they decided to turn it into shelter for homeless women and offices for organizations serving the poor. For a time, they actually were acting, unwittingly, as landlord to a brothel being run out of some of the apartments. They decided to open a night shelter for women, and volunteers came each evening to oversee the operation and befriend the women. From this personal relationship, a passion for radical hospitality was ignited.

They soon sacrificially raised money to add a fourth floor to the parish building, establishing a night shelter that could house up to 40 women each evening. Service to these women became their identity as a congregation. They conceived a risky vision for a beautiful facility on that block across the street, with transitional and permanent housing for women, wisely supported by low- and middle-income rental apartments attached to it. By partnering with other congregations, including a synagogue, and by educating themselves about available government funding, they eventually built an \$11-million facility that offers not only housing but also mental health counseling, an optometrist’s office, a chiropractic office, even a massage therapy room. It looks like a fine condo building from outside, and helped set off a wave of development in the neighborhood. And slowly, the congregation itself came back to full life, as it attracted people who saw how they loved their neighbors, and wanted to be part of what God was doing there. Here’s the amazing thing: Luther Place wasn’t much bigger than Immanuel. It just shows that when even a small group of God’s people catch a vision, and begin to take risks in a concentrated way to serve others, a fire can start...not a destructive fire, but a passionate fire, a life-changing fire. When service steps up that extra notch to risky sacrifice, amazing things can happen.

Now, we’re not in a gritty urban neighborhood. But we live in a setting that is full of need. Our sisters and brothers outside these doors are dangling from a beam, hanging on by their fingertips, crying out for justice and for aid. If we see them hanging there, can we take the risk to step out onto the beam to help them? Are we willing to risk being set on fire with passion for serving others? A central, risky passion could transform us.

Something else about Luther Place...not only was the congregation as a whole transformed and renewed, but the individual members were transformed and renewed. As they began to know and love the women they were serving, suddenly the women weren’t just a “social problem to be solved”...suddenly they were no longer just charity cases who made the givers feel good about helping them. No, suddenly they were living, breathing sisters, with gifts of their own to bring. Suddenly, people began to realize that in touching and blessing these women, they were touching and blessing Christ himself, and they were being blessed and touched in return. Their own lives were deepened spiritually and transformed.

So, sisters and brothers in Christ, fellow servants, what passion is going to ignite us here at Immanuel? What is the Spirit calling us to be and to do? What are we being called to risk? Whose are the faces in which *we* will see the face of Christ? Are we ready to be bread for the world, blessed and broken, and given lavishly to those who hunger? AMEN.