

Risk-Taking Mission and Service
Matthew 25:31-46
October 5, 2008

Ernest Henry Shackleton was born on February 15, 1874, in Ireland. While Shackleton was still young, the family moved to London where Shackleton was educated. Ernest's father wanted him to follow in his footsteps and become a doctor. Instead, Shackleton joined the merchant navy at the age of sixteen. As a sailor, he traveled to many places, but his great desire was to travel to the North and South Poles.

In December of 1914, Shackleton finally set sail for the South Pole in command of the ship *Endurance*. He took with him a crew of twenty-seven men, many of whom had answered the following recruitment notice Shackleton placed in the newspaper:

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

So many men responded to the ad that Shackleton had to turn away more than a few!ⁱ

United Methodist Bishop Robert Schnase identifies Risk-Taking Mission and Service as one of the five essential practices of a vital congregation. Doing mission and service work isn't just a nice thing for us Christians to do; it's something that we *need* to do. It's something that we *must* do. It is the very reason why God has put us here. In fact, Schnase says that a church will die if it is not doing the kind of mission and service work that Jesus talked about and demonstrated. The church will die without mission—maybe not overnight, but it will die...slowly and surely. It will gradually waste away as all of its energies and resources turn more and more inward on itself and the church becomes merely a monument to the work and witness of saints gone by.

Jesus is very clear about the direction of our mission; it is to the least of these, those who are hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the sick, the prisoner. He is not referring to writing checks. He calls us to engage with the least of these, to offer them our presence.

Too often the church replaces Risk-Taking Mission and Service with charity. Charity is what we do for the poor and marginalized to make us feel good about ourselves. We put aside funds in our budget for homeless shelters and soup kitchens; we even volunteer to feed the homeless once a week, and at the holidays we prepare food baskets for the "underprivileged," as we like to call them. Please don't misunderstand; all of this is important and necessary and part of what it means to be a faithful church. But is this sufficient? Is this enough? Can such giving become a replacement for the risk-taking mission and service that are so essential?

Instead of providing meals for the Winter Nights residents, what if we make a point to sit down and eat dinner with them? What if we not only offer them a cup of soup in Jesus' name but also give Jesus himself to them in our presence? What if we not only invite them to worship but also bring them to worship and sit with them?

Last year I had dinner with one family and heard their story. They were evicted from the house they rented in Pittsburgh because it was a foreclosure. Both husband and wife work full time; they have two daughters. They were doing the right thing. They were victims of circumstances beyond their control. Hearing their story put innocent, hard-working human faces on the mortgage and financial crisis facing our nation.

The truth is that charity is what we do for ourselves in order to make ourselves feel good. Risk-Taking Mission and Service is what we do for others because we, the church, exist for others.

I've invited Joe Darrell to share with us his experience of Risk-Taking Mission and Service in Costa Rica earlier this year.

ⁱ Allan R. Bevere, "Risky Business," *Five Practices: Leader Manual and Media* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), p. 124.