

SERMON: **“Being Fruitful: Practicing Mission and Service.”**

Rev. Geoffrey M. Ross Sun., November 14, 2010, St. James Presbyterian Church

Robert Schnase states that, “*Service refers to the volunteer impulse animated by the Spirit of God that causes people to offer their time, energy, and leadership to help their congregations and communities thrive. Through service, we become ‘doers of the word, and not merely hearers’*” (James 1:22), *putting our faith into practice in concrete and visible ways.*” “*Mission*” then “*turns service outward and focuses beyond the walls of the congregation...and refers to the positive difference we make in the lives of others, whether or not they will ever become a part of the community of faith. Mission involves our deliberate effort to improve the conditions of others; to relieve suffering; confront injustice; heal disease; and assist during times of crisis, loss, or grief. [It] pulls us out of ourselves and connects us with people we don’t know.*” He concludes by stating that “*Service and Mission are grace-driven, propelled by God’s love for all people.*” (FPFL, pgs. 102-3) In other words, these are actions which God animates us to do – not for us, or ourselves, but for others: they are God-driven responses – made through us – to the needs of others.

I’m glad that you are here and that you choose to join your voice and prayers with ours this morning: you’ve picked a good Sunday – not only because it’s been a stellar weekend, but because we are resuming our current series on fruitful living entitled “Being Fruitful,” – based on Robert Schnase’s book **Five Practices of Fruitful Living**. Up to this point in our series we have been talking about how we each – as individuals – can bear fruit by improving our inner selves: we’ve talked about how we need to practice Radical Hospitality by letting God into our lives; practice Passionate Worship so that we can fully express our gratitude to God by living lives worthy to the grace we have received; and to practice Intentional Faith Development so that we might grow in our personal faith and further our life-long journey to becoming a fully mature person of faith. So far we have – and rightly so given that this is a series about personal faith development – talked about us and how we need to let God work within us so that we might grow spiritual fruit and lead fruitful lives: but today we’re shifting the focus slightly – the onus is still on us in that this is something we must “practice/do,” but we are shifting our gaze from God to our neighbours. So as we dig in let me ask you, when was the last time you took a ‘risk’ to help someone else – someone you didn’t know? Or, to put it another way, how often do you take that first step out of your comfort zone to cross the room/street/cultural divide to do something for someone in need?

If there’s one comment that’s made in response to the call to serve/help someone/do something for someone else it would have to be “*Why?*” as in “*Why would I want to do that?*” I hear it all the time – and to be honest I’ve even asked similar questions myself – but I’ve figured out something: “*Why?*” and “*What for?*” and the subsequent excuses are not questions about planning or significance or time/priority management – they have more to do with our spiritual orientation. “*Why should I?*” isn’t a question about

motivation, it's an attempt to justify our selfishness. And "*Why would I?*" reveals our reluctance to reach out beyond our cocooned existence – unless, of course, there's something in it for us. In a world where the unspoken rule seems to be a pre-emptive "*do unto others before they can do unto you*" the 'Golden Rule' expressed by Jesus in Luke; "*do to others as you would have them do to you*" seems pretty naive and downright counter-cultural. Yet this is what Jesus calls us to do/to hold before us as a simple rule of thumb for our lives and for how we treat/interact/respond to others – especially those persons in need that God has placed around us.

As we have been learning, Jesus commanded us to "*love God with all that we are, and, love our neighbours with all that we have;*" and this is what we must do after all, John, in his first letter, tells us that if we claim to "*love God, and hate [our] brothers or sisters, – [that we] are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister – whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him (Jesus) is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.*" (1 John 4:19-21) But the question of "Why?" still persists – why would we risk ourselves, our hearts, our resources, and possibly our lives to love someone let alone help them? Well, simply, as John explains it a few verses earlier "*since God loved us so much [to send His Son to the atoning sacrifice for our sins – to send Jesus to die for us in order to bring about our salvation – then] we ought to love one another.*" (John 4:11)

In this way, living a life of faith – being fruitful – is not about giving for getting, but is about giving while forgetting yourself; it is living out of the love God has for us as defined by the Greek word used to describe God's love by New Testament: "*agape.*" "*Agape*" is the selfless love, unmotivated by beauty or worth that describes God's love for us: God doesn't love us because of what we might do for God, or because of our beauty or goodness, but only because God is love. And the only response to this love is to give ourselves over to it fully, completely, unconditionally – is to give ourselves over to the God who loves us so that God's love can, in turn, work through us as we offer the same selfless love to others. But to do this we must first choose to accept the fact that our lives are interconnected and intertwined with those around us – especially those in need. Paraphrasing a sign on a local Church that I saw yesterday, "Love only comes to fruition when it is shared – when it is exchanged" and it's true: this is why Jesus calls us to selfless love as we engage in risk-taking mission and service.

Through His teachings Jesus made this clear – He pushes us to extend not just our empathy but our actions to those in need; especially those not already within our circle of concern: the clearest – and most stark – example of this would have to be our Matthew reading with Jesus' talk of how those who wish to "*become my followers [must] deny themselves and take up their cross,*" that those who "*lose their life for my sake will find it [receive life through Him].*" The practice of *Risk-Taking Mission and Service* pushes us out of our comfort zone and into places we would never go on our own: we go where Jesus leads, even when it is uncomfortable, awkward, unexpected,

and costly. Even Paul, in the Romans reading uses this ‘dying to oneself’ language telling us that we must die to ourselves by presenting our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God, so that we can be transformed to live new lives in Christ.

And the Good News is it’s as simple as starting to serve where you are with what you have: do your part, put your faith into action by loving those that God loves – the poor, the outcast, the suffering – move beyond your comfort zone and God will transform you in the process. The mystery of God’s call for us to practice Risk-taking Mission and Service is that while our actions change the lives of those who benefit from them it also changes the lives of those who offer as we become the person God created us to be – as it fulfills God purpose for us. By serving others, we bear fruit as we bear witness to Jesus’ teaching that being fruitful is an act of giving not taking; that abundance is found in loving rather than in being loved; and that true living comes in letting go of life.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts enable us to open ourselves up to God as we seek to live fruitful lives. Amen