

Ernest Henry Shackleton was born in 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. Honor and recognition in case of success.

So many men responded to the ad that Shackleton had to turn more than a few away! What Shackleton and his men wanted to do was risky but had a great reward and promise if they were able to complete it.

In 2004 I took a giant risk. The Mission Team at Brentwood was forming a Medical Mission Team to go to Honduras. Although they had been sending construction teams to Mexico for years this was the first time that medical professionals were going as a team somewhere. And they wanted one of the pastors to go.

I prayed about it and decided to go leaving my wife and my then small daughter for 8 days. I had never been west of St. Louis at that point let alone outside of the country. As the plane made its approach into the capital city of Teg the pilot told us that it may get a little bumpy and a little risky.

He informed us very nonchalantly that the runway

was a straight drop over a mountain ridge  
and that they had to descend quickly to give them  
enough runway to land before  
they met the other side of the ridge.

How comforting for the pilot to let us know  
if he didn't get it just right we  
may all be international pancakes.

We reached our destination intact and weaved  
our way through the airport with armed soldiers all around.  
We threw our luggage in the back of a Toyota pick up,  
squeezed like sardines into a van and proceeded  
through the city streets to the place we were staying  
not knowing what the next days would hold in store for us.

Whatever you did for the least of these you did to me.  
Lord when did we see you?  
This past Wednesday through late late Friday  
I attended a church leadership conference  
called Catalyst in Atlanta GA.

It originally began ten years ago  
for church leaders under 40.  
I joked to the friend that I was there with  
that I wouldn't be able to come back next year.  
By far I was one of the oldest people there.  
80% of the 12,000 leaders that were  
gathered there were born after 1971.

It was exciting to see the vision and energy of this group  
and amazing to see how focused  
they were on missions and service.  
Everywhere you looked,  
just like at any convention you have probably attended,  
there were vendor booths.

But instead of trying to sell you the next product  
for your home or office many were  
focused on the least of these.  
One group called On a Thousand Hills Coffee  
was giving away fair trade coffee  
with the slogan Drink Coffee. Do Good.

There was Feed the Children whose  
work is done 90% in the U.S.

To Rice Bowls, Rwanda Clean Water,  
Invisible Children, and Hope International.  
Wherever you turned these groups with  
enthusiastic workers and followers were taking  
the risk that you would stop by.

Lord when did I see you hungry, thirsty, naked?  
One of the main sponsors Hope International  
actually did something very risky.  
They brought someone on stage who had taken  
just ten dollars and made 500 for the organization.

This young man used ten dollars given him  
to buy a coffee pot to host a karaoke night.  
They charged 5.00 for the coffee and borrowed a karaoke machine.  
Then at the end of his story they backed  
an armored truck into the arena and told us  
that each one of us would be getting ten dollars  
and they wanted us to see how much money  
we would make to send back to Hope International.  
It is a pretty amazing thing to see 12,000 envelopes  
with 10 real American dollars in them.  
As they passed them out you could see everyone  
opening them up to see what the deal was.  
Is this real money? What's the scam?  
What's the hook?

Well the hook is that Hope is counting on the fact  
that we really believe the words of Jesus.  
That if we love Jesus Christ as much as we say  
that we will multiply their 120,000.

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat.  
I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink.  
I was a stranger and you invited me in.  
Do we really believe that?  
They are taking a risk.

Risk Taking. All of life involves risk.  
We constantly have to decide if our goals  
are worth putting our lives on the line to achieve what we want.  
Just growing up has risks involved,  
much less getting married,  
choosing a career,  
running a business, or raising children.  
Even retiring can be risky.

But I think you'll agree that without taking the risk,  
we never receive the reward.  
What makes the risk worth it?  
Usually the reward.

Every church engages in some sort of service and mission.  
We have to have people to teach Sunday School,  
serve on committees, hand out bulletins,  
send money to missions, and so forth.  
There's nothing wrong with those sorts of service;  
in fact, they are necessary.  
But they're not very risky.

Fruitful congregations take service and mission  
a step further and engage the culture and community  
in risky acts of compassion, mercy, and justice.  
Excellent churches step out of the box  
of usual church life to serve their neighbors.

Fruitful ministry focuses on what God is  
doing outside of our own church walls.  
Bishop Schnase, our friend over the last several weeks says,  
"Risk-taking mission and service is one of the fundamenta  
l 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 resources for their own survival  
and caring only for their own people,  
then spiritual vitality wanes."  
Then he goes on to ask a 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?"  
Can you make a list?

Patricia Miller was an ER nurse who had learned  
to shut herself off emotionally from  
the trauma she saw every day.  
After five years in the ER, she had cases to treat,  
but really didn't see them as people.  
Then one day God intervened.

Patricia had admitted a young woman who

had overdosed on drugs and had attempted suicide.  
Her mother had brought her in and was  
giving the information needed.  
The mother had been awakened in the middle  
of the night by the police and was so exhausted  
she could hardly speak above a whisper.

Impatiently, Patricia dragged the information  
out of the mother and jumped to the copy machine  
to make a copy of the medical cards.  
Suddenly God clearly spoke to her heart and said.  
“You didn’t even look at her.”

Patricia stood at the copy machine and  
heard the voice again, “You didn’t even look at her.”  
She felt God’s grief for this mother and her strung-out daughter.  
Patricia bowed her head and prayed,  
“Lord, I am so sorry.”

She went back to the admissions desk  
and sat down in front of that mother and  
covered the woman’s hands with her own.  
She looked deeply into her eyes and tried  
to send all the love she could muster  
and said, “I care. Don’t give up.”

The mother, of course, just exploded in tears,  
and she poured out her broken heart for her daughter  
who had struggled with drugs for years.  
Then she thanked Patricia for caring—  
the one with the hardened heart.

Patricia Miller wrote, “My attitude changed that night.  
My Jesus came right into the workplace  
in spite of rules that tried to keep him out.  
He came in to set me free to care again.  
He gave himself to that woman through me.  
My God, who so loved the world,  
broke that self-imposed barrier around my heart.  
Now he could reach out, not only to me in my pain,  
but to a lost and hurting woman.”  
I was sick and you looked after me.

Don’t enter into risk-taking mission and service  
if you are not willing to be led by God into  
spiritual places you have never been before.

As we approached the town of Fuerzas Unidas  
which means United Forces where our  
medical mission team would do our work  
I didn't know what to expect.

I was visibly moved by what confronted my senses.  
I saw 40,000 people living in a couple of square miles  
on hillsides with dirt roads and cement block  
constructed buildings at best.

Women washing their clothes from one common  
spigot at the beginning of the city,  
a dirt field with rusting soccer goals  
was their recreational complex.  
And along the streets small corner supermarket,  
people walking and houses of every shape and design.

Mostly with no running water and sewer?  
Well let's just say we were told that when it rained  
you would be glad if your house was at the  
top of the hill rather than the bottom.  
The church was the one place where hope abounded.

Work teams had built the church and a new  
Sunday school wing over the last two years.  
That work was almost finished now our work began.  
Our dentist, nurses, and doctor saw over 150 people each day.  
And the one at the end of the line was smiling  
as much after waiting most of the day  
as the one at the beginning of the line.

We saw many things that week that were eye opening  
and many things we could do nothing about.  
I saw adults at the trash dump running with machetes  
just to get our garbage as we tried desperately to burn it  
and taking it even after we told them it was medical waste.

Children picking through bags to find food,  
something for their little shack or a toy.  
Men shooting up drugs in plain sight.  
And the line of people just waiting for the next truck  
to pull in and dump its horrid treasures.

I have seen the least of these.  
I have held the hands of small children

who probably wouldn't be there for long.  
Adults who think living to old age means making 50.  
How can anyone not be changed by that kind of experience?

I was leading a devotional for the team.

It was the last night after a week of non-stop waves of people had been coming from daylight to dusk and still they kept coming.

We had seen the face of Christ in each one that came.  
We had helped so many but  
we had failed to help so many more.

"What now?" I asked the group.

I think what I actually said was,

"What will be different in your life because of this week?"

Would this just be a neat week,  
or did God have something greater in store for them?

In risk-taking mission and service,  
both the servant and the served are transformed.  
There's a reason for that.

It's because in risk-taking mission and service,  
the one we touch is Jesus Christ.

Jesus told this parable of the Great Judgment,  
and it appears only in Matthew.

But Matthew puts it at the culmination  
of the teaching of Christ, just before he begins  
the Passion narrative leading up to Easter.

It's the punch line, the bottom line of the entire ministry of Jesus.  
And the point is this: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it  
to one of the least of these who are  
members of my family, you did it to me."

And the converse is also true:

"Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one  
of the least of these, you did not do it to me."

Those who do the former are rewarded with eternal life,  
and those who don't—well, you literally don't want to go there.

There is something else in this passage  
maybe you haven't caught before.

Did you notice that the sheep and goats  
had no idea that they were sheep and goats?

The righteous or 'just' ones are confused –

"Lord, when was it that we saw you," they wonder?

They don't remember ever encountering Jesus.  
This scene repeats in opposites with  
those who are like the goats.  
Jesus calls them accursed, unable to enter the kingdom,  
because they saw Jesus in need and did not respond.  
Likewise, the goats ask,  
"Lord, when was it that we saw you . . . and did not take care of you?"

In this passage, the crux, the key,  
seems to be in that everyone expects that they  
would have had a chance to show their good  
or bad behavior to Jesus directly.  
They don't ever remember meeting Jesus.  
But you get a sense that all of them,  
sheep and goats alike,  
would have tried to do kind things for Jesus  
if they'd met him face to face. Who wouldn't?

We mess up a lot of the time,  
but we could at least treat Jesus himself kindly, right?  
But the sheep and the goats don't realize  
that they've been seeing Jesus all along –  
in the people they meet, in the people they serve,  
or the people they've looked over.

That Christ is within us, lives in each person,  
is key for us understanding this parable.  
Whether a person is counted as a sheep  
or a goat in this passage hinges on how they treat others.  
That seems fairly simple.  
We all want to treat others kindly.  
We consider ourselves nice and friendly.

But Jesus gets at something more than that.  
Being a sheep or goat hinges not simply on how  
you treat others who happen across your path,  
but on how important it is to you to make sure  
your path crosses with others who need you to treat them well!

We've talked about being intentional about our faith.  
This passage is about being intentional too –  
Jesus seems to focus us on not just being nice or kind  
to those who come into our lives,  
but purposely coming into the lives of those who need us,  
the "least of these," who Jesus calls members of his family.

In other words, whether you are a sheep or a goat depends on your relationships – how you relate to others, who you relate to, why you relate to them.  
This parable is about relationships with those who are the least of these.

The simple but highly profound truth is this:  
when we serve others, we serve Jesus Christ.  
We say that all the time, but think of it.

The face of that unruly child in Sunday School,  
the face of that teenager with an attitude,  
the face of that old person with Alzheimer's,  
the face of that homeless person,  
the face of that immigrant who doesn't speak English,  
the face of that drug addict, the face of our spouse  
or our grandparent or a complete stranger is the face of Jesus Christ.  
How can we not love them?

One of my favorite stories that bears repeating today comes from Tony Campolo, a great preacher and professor of religion at a college in Philadelphia.

One day he was on his way to work,  
walking down the sidewalk in winter,  
dressed in his suit and overcoat,  
when he was approached by a filthy bum.

The guy was covered in soot from head to toe,  
and he had a huge beard.  
In the beard were remnants of his last several meals.  
The bum was holding a cup of  
McDonald's coffee and mumbling to himself.

He spotted Dr. Campolo and said,  
"Hey, Mister. You want some of my coffee?"  
Campolo took the cup and drank a bit, just to be nice.  
He handed the cup back and said,  
"You're being pretty generous giving away your coffee this morning.  
What's gotten into you that you're giving  
away your coffee all of a sudden?"

The bum said, ""Well, the coffee was especially delicious this morning,  
and I figured if God gives you something good  
you ought to share it with people."

Tony could feel the set-up coming,

but he walked right into it.  
He asked, "Is there anything I can give you in return?"  
He was expecting to be hit up for money.  
Unfortunately the bum said, "Yeah, you can give me a hug."  
Five bucks would have been better.

But there on the Philadelphia sidewalk,  
Tony Campolo put his arms around this filthy man,  
trying to avoid the pieces of rotted food in his beard,  
and the man hugged him. And kept hugging him.  
He would not let go.

People were staring at the professional in the overcoat  
and the homeless bum embracing on the street.  
Tony was embarrassed,  
until suddenly his embarrassment turned to awe.  
He said, "I heard a voice echoing down the  
corridors of time saying, I was hungry.  
Did you feed me? I was naked.  
Did you clothe me? I was sick.  
Did you care for me?

I was the bum you met on Chestnut Street.  
Did you hug me?  
For if you did it unto the least of these,  
my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.  
And if you failed to do it unto the least of these,  
my brothers and sisters, you failed to do it unto me."  
Are you ready to take the risk? Amen.