

The Risk Of Your Neighborhood

by: Alex Absalom

"Our God is a God of risks. God is ready to jeopardize His divine enterprise, to have me as His agent of transformation, so that the Kingdom of this world will become the Kingdom of God." (Desmond Tutu)

Yesterday I found myself in a very familiar place. I was chatting with a non-Christian neighbor and knew, as he steered the conversation, that I had a very natural opportunity to talk about the difference Jesus is making in a particular situation in my life. As always, my stomach did somersaults in those few seconds - which can feel like a few hours - as I waited my turn to talk. The Holy Spirit was speaking clearly to me, I knew I could share about the reality of Jesus' love and presence in an authentic manner, yet still I hesitated...

I'm sure you will resonate with that dilemma. It may be one thing to do some hit-and-run evangelism in a far-off city on a college missions trip, it is another thing entirely to put your relationship with a friend on the line by introducing religion. Far easier to say something massively and controversially political - Tea Party anyone?!

Yet if we're to be effective as missionaries into our local contexts, we have to learn how to take such risks. At RiverTree Church, where we live in NE Ohio, we define the 'mission' part of our missional communities with two words - service and witness. I've noticed that for many people the service element is far more preferable than the witness part, yet the Biblical pattern involves both strands. I wonder if this is because being a servant involves a lower level of risk than being a witness.

Of course, I'm not saying we go out and randomly bash people with bits of the bible in order to give ourselves a religious buzz. Yet just being nice and hoping that somehow the content of the Gospel will move by osmosis into their hearts isn't much of a plan either.

What I've noticed is that God seems to put us into situations where we have the opportunity to be 'naturally supernatural' in our outlook.

A neighbor loses their job, and not only do we help practically, we pray for them and with them and ask for God's guidance over the search process. One time a friend of ours, who didn't then follow Jesus, had many months out of work, looking for a role in a very specialized field, eventually coming close to what seemed the ideal job. Walking past his house later that day, he came bounding out to greet us, with the words, "I got the job! I got the job!". As we opened our mouth to congratulate him, he stopped, pointed sharply at me and declared, "And I know it was because you were praying for me!".

A friend is sick and I have the choice: am I going to offer to pray for their healing? And when they say yes (interestingly, the only people who've ever turned me down on that offer have been Christians), will I lay on hands right there and then and pray a simple, non-religious language prayer of faith? And then, will I resist launching into a long list of all the reasons why God does not always heal?

I wonder if the reason why Jesus keeps this risk element in play is that it forces us to be reliant upon Him to intervene.

By definition, when I tell others about the love of God and tangible ways this is experienced, I'm no longer in control of the process. I risk looking a complete fool if the prayer is not answered. I risk a sarcastic or barbed response from the person I'm reaching out to - which of course lands on me, even though the root cause of their spiritual angst may lay decades in the past. I risk them putting me in that box labeled "Religious Nutcases", somewhere near the people that picket military funerals or burn Korans.

Only Jesus can make the difference, whether that occurs immediately or over time. Will I have faith that He does, in fact, back us up when He sends us out to make disciples?

My wife Hannah and I have moved house four times, and on each occasion we have asked God to show us our People of Peace, to give us openings to serve them and also to talk naturally about Jesus. Over time, some of those people have become Jesus followers, but always it has involved moments of risk on our part. In each place we have walked with new friends through sicknesses, unemployment, marriages, divorces, births and deaths, along with all the more mundane highs and lows of living in this world. If we are willing to be wise risk takers, to naturally supernaturally point people to the realities of the Kingdom that is breaking in here and now, then all sorts of life transformation can follow.

As pioneer missionary Hudson Taylor once wrote, "Unless there is an element of risk in our exploits for God, there is no need for faith".