

**Just do it!**  
Matthew 13:1-9  
January 20, 2008

I used to be a pretty good waterskier. I say "used to be" not because I'm not a good waterskier anymore. I really don't know because I haven't had the opportunity to ski in a very long time! I could slalom, ski on one ski, cutting back and forth across the wake of the boat, jumping the waves. I could even start out on one ski, coming up out of the water one foot on the ski, the other foot dragging in the water until I was up and could put it into the back stirrup.

I was a pretty good skier, but my mentor used to tell me, "You'll never get any better than you are now because you're afraid to fall."

Do you know what that's like? Staying in your comfort zone, not pushing yourself, not taking risks? Maybe because you don't want to fail. Maybe because you don't want to fail. Maybe because you'd rather do nothing than risk embarrassing yourself or making a mistake.

Do you know what it's like to hold yourself back? Maybe because you don't want to do it if you're not sure you can. Maybe because you don't want to do it if you can't do it at least as good or better than everybody else. Maybe because you can see all too clearly everything that could go wrong.

Do you hesitate to do anything that is risky or unpopular or seemingly foolish or just plain "out there?" Can you think of lots of good reasons not to do it?

Jesus said, "Love your neighbor as you love yourself ..."

And I want to. We want to, and we have undertaken lots of service projects and mission efforts intended to benefit neighbors both close to home and far away. But do you ever wonder if it's really worth all the time and effort and money? Are we really making a difference, or just satisfying our own need to feel like we are doing something worthwhile?

We stock a food pantry with your donations and with funds from the Christmas and Easter offerings. We give out boxes of food on request to folks who come by the church looking for help -- nice boxes, filled with an ample supply of food, enough to feed a family of four or five for a week.

But we're not a social service agency. We don't have the time or resources to screen our "clientele." How do we know the people who ask for food really need it? How do we know they're not just "making the rounds," getting what they can from whomever they can? How do we know we're not just being used?

Our Sunday School attendees give money each week for Heifer Project. We have already raised over \$1100 since September. Heifer Project is a wonderfully effective ministry, helping folks not by giving them handouts, but by giving them the means to make a living.

And yet, despite the involvement of Heifer Project for decades, with projects spread around the globe, and despite the efforts of countless relief and development agencies,

governmental and non-governmental, hunger is still a global epidemic, killing 16,000 children around the world each day! The world's population is exploding. We are trying to feed more and more people with less and less land, and people go hungry, not always for lack of resources, but because of social oppression and injustice and governmental corruption. What can we do about that? Our gifts are just a drop of water in an ocean of need, and war and poverty and drought and social unrest are making people hungry much faster than we can feed them.

And speaking of drought ... In April, our church will be hosting a workshop for area churches entitled "Cool Congregations." Nine of us attended a similar workshop at St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Cedar Falls about a year ago. Lay leaders from St. Luke's have developed this program to help members of congregations learn about and act on the problem of climate change from a faith perspective.

But you know we are not all of one mind on this issue, and even if we were, the little changes we might make in our own lifestyles can hardly have any measurable impact on the global environment. If we are to do something as a human race about global warming, we will have to do it as a world community, nations -- all nations -- working together, and even then can we really expect to slow or reverse the momentum of planetary forces?

Some of you work in the Waterloo school system as mentors, and for the gift of your time and the investment of your caring, you are to be commended. But what can you do in an hour or two a week to offset the detrimental effects of parental indifference and destructive peer pressures and social stratification?

Food pantries and relief projects and global warming actions and tutoring. There are good reasons to question the usefulness and effectiveness of any of these efforts. In each case, there are lots of good reasons not to do it.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers ..."

There are few words that stir up my emotions like that word, "peace" There are few things I desire more, and pray for more -- for myself, for those I love, and for this world -- than peace. But there are few things that seem more elusive.

President Bush is surely to be commended for his latest effort to jump start the peace process among Israelis and Palestinians, but do we really expect him to succeed where so many have failed? Oh, there have been seeming successes before, landmark peace agreements, but what has really changed? Do Israelis and Palestinians hate each other any less, trust each other any more? And there's one thing that's sure to happen if you put yourself in the middle of a fight. You'll get shot at too!

Many people in the West think the greatest threat to peace today is Islamic fundamentalism. To be fair, we must also admit that many people in the Arab world think the greatest threat to peace today is Western imperialism. In any case, these two worlds, divided by religion and ethnicity, stand against each other, filled with mistrust and suspicion and fear.

And we should try to make peace? How? If we do try -- try to talk, try to understand, try to empathize -- many will see us as betraying "our side." And it is difficult to see how such radically different ways of looking at the world, how such radically different ways of structuring society, how such radically different ways of thinking about God, could ever be reconciled.

People are talking again about the nuclear threat, about the real possibility that, not a nation, but a terrorist group, could acquire and use a nuclear weapon. The results of such an attack are unthinkable. We've tried before to reduce the threat -- the SALT treaties, the nuclear freeze movement, agreements to destroy and secure existing warheads -- but the world is still filled with countless armed weapons, and we and other nations are making more. It's a bell you can't unring, and nobody, no nation, is going to divest themselves of a nuclear weapon as long as anybody, any other nation, still has one. And as long as nations have nuclear weapons, there is the chance that somebody who wants one could get one.

Even in the church, it is difficult to make peace! People have their own sets of expectations, their own tastes in worship styles, their own preferred ways of doing things. Even when we all believe Jesus wants us to be one, we have a hard time doing it. Few of us are prepared to give in, to go along, to be willing to do it "their way" just so we can preserve our unity. Or few of us are willing to take the risks and put in the work required to learn to understand and appreciate each other and reach a common mind about things.

It would be nice to work at making peace, but there are lots of good reasons not to do it.

Jesus said, "Go into all the world and make people everywhere my disciples ..."

But what if they don't want to be disciples? Is it my job to try to convince them that following Jesus is a good idea? Isn't faith something private, something personal, not something to be talked about in public?

Even if I do believe that Jesus can change people's lives, that the gospel does set people free, I really don't feel comfortable talking about my faith. It would feel awkward or unnatural to bring Jesus into the conversation. I'm not good at it. That's the minister's job! I don't know enough about the Bible or about my faith to answer their questions.

And people who do talk about their faith? I know what people say about them, how people turn them off and turn them away. I don't want to be rejected. I don't want to be ostracized. I don't want people to talk about me!

Sure evangelism sounds like a good idea, but there are lots of good reasons not to do it.

Once there was a man who went out to sow grain. As he scattered the seed in the field, some of it fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some of it fell on rocky ground, where there was little soil. The seeds soon sprouted, because the soil wasn't deep. But when the sun came up, it burned the young plants; and because the roots had not grown deep enough, the plants soon dried up. Some of the seed fell among thorn bushes, which grew up and choked the plants. But some seeds fell in good soil, and the plants bore grain; some had one hundred grains, others sixty, and others thirty ...

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