

The Shelter, Nurture, and Spiritual Fellowship of the Children of God

Mark 2:1-12

First Presbyterian Church

March 6, 2022

Introduction to the Bible Reading

Our spiritual grandparents have given us some language about the church. This language is called the “great ends of the church” – or great purposes. They speak to an important question... it’s always important, but particularly in times of transition – what is the church for? Why does the church exist? As we said last week, it’s old language that we don’t really use anymore, but there is still wisdom here. The first great end of the church is the “proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind.” The second is the “shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God.”

Prayer for Illumination

Living God,
help us so to hear your holy Word
that we may truly understand;
that, understanding, we may believe,
and, believing,
we may follow in all faithfulness and obedience,
seeking your honor and glory in all that we do;
through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Bible Reading

When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. ²So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. ³Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. ⁴And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. ⁵When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” ⁶Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ⁷“Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” ⁸At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, “Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? ⁹Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk’? ¹⁰But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” —he said to the paralytic— ¹¹“I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.” ¹²And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!”

Sermon

A newborn-infant cries out in the night. Her mother rushes to her crib, scoops her up, and settles her gently against her shoulder. The baby utters a contented moan as Mom gently pats her back while rocking back and forth on her feet. Soon her baby's eyes begin to close. Mom holds her a few moments longer before setting her down in her crib, and as she turns to leave, she notices her little one's eyes open ever so quickly, peering through the crib bars. But there is no cry because Mom has once again answered her question – a question she won't be able to put into words for several years, but even now she is asking: Is anyone there? It is the deepest question she will ever ask... THE MOST PROFOUND question of the human soul: Am I alone? Have I been thrust into this world only to be abandoned? Is anyone there?

With this second "Great End of the Church" God's people answer this question with a resounding "No!" and a resounding "Yes!" No, you are not alone! Yes, there is someone there! At birth and at death and through every life passage in between, as part of this people, you will find shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship. If the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind^[1] is about spreading the seed of faith outside our community, then this second "Great End" is all about protecting and watering and feeding that seed inside our community so that it grows to maturity.

Writer Ann Lamott tells the story of a little seven-year-old girl who got lost one day: She ran up and down the streets of the big town where they lived, but she couldn't find a single landmark. She was very scared, of course... and finally, a police officer stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat of his car, and just drove around the neighborhood until she finally saw her church. She pointed it out to the policeman, and then told him firmly, "You can let me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here. This, Lamott says, is how she feels about her church: "... because no matter how bad I am feeling, how lost or lonely or frightened, when I see the faces of the people at my church, when I hear their tawny voices, I can always find my way home."^[1]

Well, we hear folks talk about having a "church home" – and church is clearly a place of safety and security... but it's more than that. Church is also where we learn... and then remember... who we are... church is where things that really matter are reinforced... and the values we cherish are etched into our hearts, so we don't forget them.¹ This morning in the sanctuary service, we will baptize Kennedy Taylor... and when we do, we will be reminded that each of us is "a child of the covenant, sealed by the Holy Spirit, and marked as Christ's own forever."

So, a huge part of being the church is learning what it means to be children of God. We are learning what it means to come home to God's house. We are learning how to treat one another with respect and decency.

^[1] The first Great End of the Church and the theme of last Sunday's sermon.

^[1] Ann Lamott, *Traveling Mercies* (NY: Pantheon, 1999).

² Christine Chakoian, "Starting at the Ends," a sermon in *Proclaiming the Great Ends of the Church*, Joseph D Small, edit., (Geneva - 2010) p. 33.

We are learning, gradually, the language, the culture, the household rules. And we are learning our family story:

How God has many children, but loves each one of us
How God keeps looking after us,
 even when we're behaved badly
How God sets appropriate limits for us
 and consequences when we blow it
How God has wonderful hopes for us,
 and desires our help in the family business –
 the business of the wholeness and healing of the world.²

And when we forget who we are... or like that little girl, get lost and cannot find our way home... or when we are so broken, we cannot get back on our own... our family does what we cannot do on our own... they bring us back home... back to Jesus... even if it means taking the roof off the building. This is the power of the community of Jesus – like the friends of the paralyzed man, they carry us when we cannot carry ourselves... we hold on to THEIR FAITH when our faith falters. Chances are you've been on both sides of this equation at one time or another – you've been carried into Jesus' home, and you've done the carrying... you've been the giver and the receiver in this dear household of God.

One of the things we were reminded of three weeks ago when we “looked in the mirror” is how much giving and receiving there is going on in this community: Stephen Ministers who walk alongside those who grieve, are sick, or lonely... and those who are held by them when they cannot stand on their own. The Knitwits and Happy Hookers who knit prayer shawls... and those whose knees and shoulders are wrapped in these mantles of love. The folks who deliver Wednesday Night Suppers and Christmas and Easter baskets and who host visitations following a memorial service... and those who are blessed by their offering. The elders and prayer group who lift people up to the Lord... and the ones who are lifted. And the countless cards sent, and notes written, and calls made... and all of those who feel the power of these behind-the-scenes acts of kindness.

I don't know how many times I have heard church folk say, “I don't know how people do it without a church family. Life is so hard sometimes. I just don't know what I would do if I didn't have my church.” Have you ever thought that? Said that? If so, then good chances you were talking about this second great end of the church... what our spiritual grandparents describe as the “shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God.” May God allow THAT be said about this church, always!

² Christine Chakoian, p. 34