

WORSHIP

Sermon | 1.24.2021



Shelter, Nurture, and Spiritual Fellowship

The Reverend Pen Peery

Ephesians 2:11-22

Today we continue our sermon series on The Great Ends of the Church. For my friends at First United Presbyterian who have been worshipping from your sanctuary the past few weeks – we started this series the beginning of January as we celebrate our 200th year of ministry. The Great Ends of the Church are six, aspirational statements that the Presbyterian Church adopted in 1910 to guide our work and ministry.

Today's focus is on the Great End calls for the church to "Provide for the Shelter, Nurture, and Spiritual Fellowship of the Children of God."

The Scripture I have chosen to illuminate this Great End is a passage from Ephesians, which I will read in a moment after the anthem. Before we hear that Scripture, I want to give a little bit of context. Ephesians is a letter that is addressed to the church in Ephesus – which is modern day Turkey. Like a lot of other letters that made it into the New Testament, one perennial issue for the early church was how to build a community out of people who had been separated by religious law for generations. This was the earliest challenge for the church: how to integrate Gentiles (those who were not Jewish and did not follow Jewish law)



into the family of faith with those who – though they put their faith in Christ – had been Jewish and followed the Jewish law and had been conditioned (out of a desire to preserve their faith) to treat those who did not follow the law as “unclean.”

From the very beginning, the health of the church depended on cultivating a community out of difference – so that all members of the body could find a place, could be nurtured in their faith, and could connect in fellowship. The issues change – but the goal remains the same.

Before we hear this Scripture – and our anthem – let us go before God in prayer...

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So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called ‘the uncircumcision’ by those who are called ‘the circumcision’—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and



aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.

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Abby was 13 when she came back to church.

She had been baptized at the church where I last served as an infant, but that was many years before I showed up.

She was a distant relative of another one of our members, but it was obvious that she didn't fit the mold – of the family or the church. She came from a different part of town. She dressed in a various shades of black with lots and lots of chains. Her hair color alternated between green and pink.

Beyond the physical appearance, Abby also behaved differently. She didn't really know how to hold a conversation. She laughed at awkward times. She seemed uncomfortable with people giving her attention or care. She always needed rides to and from church events and scholarship money to go on retreats.

Abby had spent most of her childhood figuring out how to cope on her own as she bounced between her mom and dad – both of whom were in and out of rehab – and neither of whom had enough money or time to support their daughter.

It didn't take long before I noticed that Abby not only coming to more events at the church – but also begin to come out of her shell. She smiled more. She



became more comfortable with the older women asking her about school, or inviting her to sit next to them in the fellowship hall for a church supper.

She became a fixture at youth group on Sunday night. Showing up early. Participating in conversations. She started volunteering to help lead children's events: The Easter Egg hunt, making cotton-ball ears to be put on kindergartener-sheep in the Christmas pageant, helping with Vacation Bible School.

Her wardrobe stayed the same – as did her multi-colored hair – but before I left that church to come here, Abby was very much a part of the fabric of that community. That's not because she conformed to the mold. It is because the people of that congregation showed her what it was to be loved...included...accepted. They displayed Christ's heart. The church became shelter...nurture...and spiritual fellowship.

13 years before Abby came back to church – at her baptism – was the last time her dad attended worship. He had grown up in the church – stayed halfway connected through his early adult years. But (I learned), it became harder and harder for him to ignore the cold shoulders, the sideways glances, and the social isolation that greeted him whenever he would cross the threshold of the sanctuary doors. He had taken a different path than others he had grown up with: no college, no white-collar job. He had struggles with addiction – indeed, the day he brought Abby for baptism he reeked like a bar room towel. People in the congregation noticed. People talked.

Abby's dad didn't feel like the church was his place anymore. So he left and never came back.



It was the same church. Abby and her dad just had two very different experiences of it.

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I've been the pastor at First Presbyterian Church of Charlotte long enough to have had a range of conversations with our members. The vast majority of those conversations are positive – life-giving – and rich. Of course, some of those conversations are difficult: people who have received unwelcome news about a diagnosis; people who are upset because of something the church did (or didn't do).

Occasionally, I've had conversations with people who have decided to leave the church. Sometimes, it's because they have theological differences with where the church is going (which I always respect, even if it makes me sad). But the conversations that are really tough for me are when people leave the church because they say they couldn't find their place – or they didn't feel seen – or they didn't experience the community's welcome.

To be clear – there are far, **far** more conversations I have with people – many times new members – who tell me that **the reason** they were drawn to join our church was because of the warmth of this place; they appreciate the fact that we have a genuine sense of community – and an increasing desire to tear down any boundaries that get in the way of our hospitality.

My point in sharing these stories and experiences of the two congregations I know and love the best is to illustrate how impactful – and fragile – this Great End of the church is: to provide for the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the people of God.



There are some things that the church does that are the pastor and the staff's responsibility. There are some things that are the Deacon's and the Elder's to do. When it comes to creating a place of welcome – so that each person who enters our community feels like they belong...that is **every** member's responsibility.

And it is more important that I think we realize.

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If I had to pick which Great End of the church has been most impacted by the pandemic we are currently living through, I would say it is the one we are exploring today. How do we provide shelter when people can't gather under our roof? How do we offer nurture when we are all experiencing life in isolation? How do we sustain and extend the bonds of fellowship to a Zoom-weary community?

That's the adaptive challenge we face – and we will continue to work hard to overcome it, but it's hard.

Every Sunday morning during worship, though, I witness a group of people persevering through the times we are in to strengthen their fellowship.

“Gathering” for worship these past ten months has meant different things for different people. For a few hundred of you – that means going to the websites of First United or First Pres – to worship by livestream. For thousands of you – it means turning on your televisions to channel 64 (WAXN). For a group of 30-40 of you – it looks like worshipping via Facebook live...where you can not only watch the service, but interact with one another with your comments.



Sunday mornings, after Will plays the last note on the Postlude, I check my phone to look in on the Facebook live worship group. It's an eclectic group of people. Different in many ways – racially, politically, age-wise, background. Most are members of either of our churches, but some are not.

Over these ten months, they have created a rhythm...or a kind-of liturgy for their time together. They greet one another as they come online - some of whom, I'm pretty sure, have never met each other in-person. They celebrate when we have a baptism – I'm sure they did so today with Gigi's baptism. They express appreciation to the choir and the praise team for their anthems. They commit to pray for those whom we lift up to God's care. After the service, they wish each other well until they gather again the next week.

It's a small, but mighty group.

But with an absolutely **beautiful** witness: that the connections we have in Christ are stronger and more resilient than a pandemic that tests our patience or the polarizing climate that tries to tell us who are (and who aren't) our people.

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When the writer of Ephesians tries to communicate how the church should model its life together as a community of spiritual fellowship, he uses the metaphor of Christ being the cornerstone.

Cornerstones, of course, support incredible weight.

They shore up a structure and give it order.

They are the point of focus around which everything else is oriented.



Without a cornerstone it is difficult to build anything that lasts.

I would imagine that the members the church who first read these words in Ephesians were wondering how they would fashion a community out of a collection of so many different people – insiders and outsiders, Jews and Gentiles, refined and rough around the edges. The answer is that Christ can shoulder the weight of difference. Christ can help us transcend it. Shape a purpose beyond the things we too often substitute for cornerstones.

In Second Corinthians, the Apostle Paul writes – “in Christ, God is reconciling the world to himself.”

And as the church is Christ’s body – how we provide shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship is not only valuable to our members – but it is a testimony to the world around us about the hope and power of God.

The church often measures its effectiveness and impact through things that are tangible: budgets, attendance, mission dollars, baptisms. All those things are important, of course.

But before all of that – we must remember and be guided by a truth that is both simple and easy to overlook in our busy and scattered lives: that each person who walks through our doors – virtually or in-person – is no longer a stranger or an alien...but a citizen with the saints, and a member of the household of God.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

