

“Outdo One Another”

Based on Romans 12: 9-21 & Matthew 16:21-28 and
Great Ends of the Church: Shelter, Nurture and Spiritual Fellowship of the Children of God
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July 31, 2011

Last week, our focus was on the Proclamation of the Gospel for the Salvation of Humankind. Today we continue our series on the six Great Ends of the Church with the Shelter, Nurture and Spiritual Fellowship of the Children of God.

In her book *Traveling Mercies*, author Ann Lamott writes about a seven year old girl who got lost. “The little girl ran up and down the streets of the big town where they lived, but she couldn’t find a single landmark. She was frightened. Finally a policeman stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat of his car and they drove around until she finally saw her church. She pointed it out to the policeman, and then she told him firmly, ‘You could let me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here.’” Lamott goes on to describe her similar her feelings about Saint Andrew Presbyterian Church saying, “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, and hear their tawny voices, I can always find my way home.”¹ Clearly Saint Andrew Presbyterian Church—or more precisely, the congregation of Saint Andrew—is shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of at least one child of God.

The Shelter, Nurture and Spiritual Fellowship of the Children of God. Notice how it’s stated. The shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God. The church is not called to *provide* the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God but to *be* the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God. Unlike the other Great Ends—proclamation of the Gospel for the salvation of humankind, maintenance of Divine worship, preservation of the truth, promotion of social righteousness and exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world—all of which are things the church ought to *do*, the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God is what the church ought to *be*.

Furthermore, all the other Great Ends have this element of what we are to do for the sake of someone or something else—proclaiming the gospel for the sake of humankind, maintenance of Divine worship for God’s sake, preservation of the truth for the sake of God and humankind, promotion of social righteousness for the sake of humankind, exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven for the sake of humankind. Of course all of those actions are also for our own sakes, but our own benefit seems secondary. Mostly, these are things that we, in some way, are able to offer to others. Whereas in the church’s being the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God, we are as much in need of the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship as anyone else. We are able to not only *be* but *receive* the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship as children of God.

¹ Ann Lamott, *Traveling Mercies* (NY: Pantheon, 1999)

This week in our Great Ends of the Church classes, I asked “when you hear ‘shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of all God’s children’ what comes to mind?” Notice, the “spiritual” is only attached to the “fellowship.” So for years, this Great End always evoked connotations of literal shelter and nurture for me, meeting the most basic needs of the children of God and inextricably linked with the other Great Ends of the Church, especially promotion of social righteousness and exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world. But many of you described an understanding of a more spiritual form of shelter and nurture. Of course, both are important. We are called as individuals and as a church family to both *be* and *receive* the spiritual shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship for all God’s children both within and beyond our church walls as well as work to meet the *literal* needs of shelter, nurture and fellowship of the children of God both within and beyond our church walls.

And who are God’s children? While there are some who believe that only Christians are God’s children, our denomination’s “Brief Statement of Faith” makes clear that “God created the world good and makes everyone equally in God’s image, male and female, of every race and people, to live as one community.” The call to be shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship for the children of God knows no limits. *All* God’s children, including ourselves.

We see in today’s scriptures this clear call to obedience to God and a connection between a believer’s love of God and service to the human community. God calls Moses to serve God by leading God’s children out of slavery. Paul teaches the early church, how to treat one another, strangers and even enemies, “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ No, ‘if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

If you’re like me, the parts about vengeance being God’s and heaping burning coals on your enemies’ heads make you a little uncomfortable and seem out-of-place in scripture about how to be a loving Christian. But they simply represent Paul’s understanding of human nature. Paul knows that it’s hard for us to give up vengeance entirely, so he suggests that it’s God’s job. And certainly if vengeance belongs to anyone, it belongs to God. But my understanding of the God of love and Prince of Peace is that, though vengeance may be up to God, rather than taking the option mercy will prevail. And the “heaping burning coals” on the heads of enemies by doing good to

them, is Paul's way of saying, "kill them with kindness." Again, because it's hard for we humans to accept the idea of simply doing good for our enemies.

I love the idea of trying to outdo one another in showing honor. We're such a competitive society but how often do we think of trying to outdo one another in following Christ? Of course, adding an element of competition to faith can bring out some ugliness. We don't want to become or even seem self-righteous or judgmental or any other unsavory characteristic that could be associated with trying to outdo one another in our faith, so maybe a better way to think of it is: outdo *yourself* in being genuine, holding fast to what is good, loving others, showing honor and zeal. Outdo yourself in being ardent in spirit, serving God, rejoicing in hope, being patient in suffering, persevering in prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints and extending hospitality to strangers.

In these ways we are shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship for the children of God. As Jesus tells Peter and the other disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"

As one commentator notes, "Obedience in covenant is not merely a matter of keeping rules. It is an act of being massively and completely transformed, readied for a new life in the world, which is marked by liberality and hospitality."² So how can we—both as individuals and as a church—be transformed by obedience to God? How can we be transformed by being the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship for one another and for all God's children?

In some Bibles, this Romans passage is captioned "Marks of a True Christian." According to Paul, some of the marks of a true Christian are being genuine, holding fast to what is good, loving others, showing honor and zeal, being ardent in spirit, serving God, rejoicing in hope, being patient in suffering, persevering in prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, extending hospitality to strangers, and overcoming evil with good. How do Paul's marks of a true Christian compare to the marks of membership from our denomination's Book of Order in the section titled, "Membership as Ministry" wherein is stated:

"A faithful member accepts Christ's call to be involved responsibly in the ministry of his Church. Such involvement includes

- a. proclaiming the good news,
- b. taking part in the common life and worship of a particular church,
- c. praying and studying Scripture and the faith of the Christian Church,
- d. supporting the work of the church through the giving of money, time, and talents,
- e. participating in the governing responsibilities of the church,

² Brueggemann, Walter, et al, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on NRSV-Year A*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 461.

- f. demonstrating a new quality of life within and through the church,
- g. responding to God's activity in the world through service to others,
- h. living responsibly in the personal, family, vocational, political, cultural, and social relationships of life,
- i. working in the world for peace, justice, freedom, and human fulfillment.

While Paul's marks of a Christian tend to be more about how to *be* and how to treat one another, with some elements of what to *do*, our marks for membership tend to be more about what to *do* with some elements of how to *be*. But the lists fit together so well. You can't genuinely do what a Christian is called to do if you are not being what a Christian is called to be. And we certainly will not—cannot—take up our cross and follow Christ without displaying these marks of a Christian.

When the new building for Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago was dedicated in 1904, the President of McCormick Theological Seminary, James G. K. McClure said:

“My soul's desire and prayer to God for this church is that its heart may be like unto the heart of God, that heart that loves every child of earth.... O, that this church may be bigger than any one creed, sect or class or race or color. May it be so big that any human being may feel at home here, may draw nigh to God here. May it be the mission of this church to tell every person in unmistakable terms how dear there are—preciously dear—to God, and then to live those words in the magnanimity of its welcome, the warmth of its fellowship, and the generosity of its devotion.”³

In other words, my soul's desire and prayer for this church is that we will be the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship for the children of God. My soul's desire and prayer for this church is that each one of us will outdo ourselves in being the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship for the children of God. My soul's desire and prayer for this church is that we will each take up our cross and follow Christ. What's your soul's desire and prayer for this church?

³ From the Historical Service to dedicate the new building of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, May 12, 1914, as quoted by Elizabeth F. Caldwell in *Shelter, Nurture, and Spiritual Fellowship of the Children of God* (Louisville, Kentucky: Witherspoon Press, 2006), 22.