

May 12, 2019
Fourth Sunday of Easter
Mother's Day

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GREAT ENDS OF THE CHURCH V – MAKING GOD'S HOUSE A HOME

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

Over the course of the past few weeks, we have been looking together at the purpose of the church, the reason for the church's existence. To help us, we have been looking at a particular mission statement that we find in our Constitution known as "The Great Ends of The Church." We have been looking at these "great ends" one by one: the maintenance of divine worship, the Proclamation of the Gospel for the Salvation of Humankind; the preservation of truth ... and, today, the Shelter, Nurture and Spiritual Fellowship of the Children of God. Our purpose has been to translate them into our own language, into something that we can understand and comprehend, and put into practice in the part of the world in which God has placed us.

Psalm 122, Ephesians 2:19-22

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.

Prayer for Illumination

We have built this house of worship not as a vault to contain you but as a reminder of the sanctuary that is the whole world you have made, not because this is the only place we find you, but because here we are reminded by attentive who you have called us to be and what you expect us to do.

INTRODUCTION

Of all the Great Ends of the Church, "the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God" may appear most central to the life of a congregation. Shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship -- warm words that have more to do with personal meaning and

relationships than with organizational purpose. Shelter, nurture, and fellowship speak of secure, protected growth in the life of faith. They are words of challenge for the church to deepen opportunities for friendship, enrichment, growth, and wholeness.

IMAGES FOR THIS GREAT END

I struggled to find an adequate image to represent this "great end." An often used image for the church depicts it as an "ark of salvation," a safe vessel on stormy seas. Yet today, when the church is pictured as the ark of salvation, the old joke soon surfaces: "The church is like Noah's ark. If it weren't for the storm outside, you wouldn't be able to stand the stench inside." It is true enough that the church sometimes exhibits all the worst characteristics of humanity. The church is neither infallible nor impeccable; it is often foolish and faithless; sometimes it is deceitful and dangerous. It is not always a place of safe shelter or the location of nurturing fellowship. Yet, once we have laid bare every dismal failing and recalled every unpleasant episode, we will agree that a great end, a primary purpose, a motivating mission must be the "shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship for the children of God."

HOME

I'd like to have us translate the language of this "Great end" into the image of making God's house a home.

There's - hearth and home, home sweet home, --You can hit close to home, or be home grown; You can wait for the cows to come home,

There's: welcome home. Down home, go home, my ole Kentucky home, O give me a home where the buffalo roam;

There's: home rule, home-work, something to write home about...

You can be home free, home sick; hit a home run. Any way you look at it –

A house is made with walls and beams. A home is made with love and dreams.

Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam, Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home. (click my heels together three times)

Here's my favorite: *Home is where you can say anything you please, because nobody pays any attention to you anyway.*

In all the ways that matter, humanity is on a quest for homecoming. Humanity has an insatiable hunger to gather near the hearth and warm themselves before the blaze of God's love. In her book *Soul Feast*, Marjorie Thompson expresses what many of us sense: "There is a hunger abroad in our time, haunting lives and hearts. Like an empty stomach aching beneath the sleek coat of a seemingly well-fed creature, it reveals that something is missing from the diet of our rational, secular, and affluent culture." [1]

Sociologist Peter Berger has written a book entitled *The Homeless Mind*. In it he observes that people live in so many "life worlds," so many structures, that more and more individuals experience life as "migratory, ever-changing, mobile," with one "world" contradicting

another. Such is the scene reflected with a successful young businesswoman who responded to a real estate agent who wanted to sell her a home. "A home?" she said, "Why do I need a home? I was born in a hospital, educated in a boarding school, courted in an automobile, married in a church. We eat in restaurants, spend our mornings playing golf and our afternoons playing bridge at the club. Evenings we go to the movies, and when I die I'm going to be buried at a mortuary. I don't need a home. All I need is a garage!"

There are many ways in which one might describe the spirit of our times, but any true characterization would have to include the feeling of homelessness. A rampantly widespread up-rootedness. The places and structures where their hearts and hopes once rested either no longer exist or have changed beyond recognition and acceptance.

Then there are those who know "home" only by a dark sense of its absence in their lives. I am not speaking of those who literally have no shelter -- though the gross deprivation of those we label "street people" make the tragedy of our era infinitely deeper. I am speaking, rather, of men and women from virtually all age and socio-economic groups, who have both kin and a roof over their heads, and yet have no "home" -- no one to whom they belong. They find themselves in some sort of wandering exile, - unanchored, unfulfilled. Strangers to their minds, they have no thoughts of their own. Strangers to their emotions, they run scared of their feelings. Not at home with themselves, they aren't at home with others. Not knowing how to engage others they withdraw.

All of us have, no doubt, had the experience of someone asking, "Where are you from?" The question is one not only of origin, but one of belonging. Home is not so much a place as it is a position. It is not an address with a mortgage, but a passion which finds its place in principle. It is a frame of reference, a point of identification, the birthplace and nurturing field for our values. Home gives us our moral foundation. Harry Overstreet in his book *The Mature Mind* observes that: Home is a place where we can begin to remake our culture. If our culture has slipped into unsound habits or irresponsibility and egocentricity, the home is a place where we can begin to mitigate these habits. If our culture has slipped into carelessness regarding human values, the home is a place where these values can be cherished and made to grow in influence. If our culture has learned to put a disastrously high premium on competition, the home is a place where cooperative acts can be a strength and a delight. Nowhere in our culture is there an institution that can, more variously and deeply, serve the needs of our maturing than can the home.

For a house – even God's house – to be a home, as God's tenants we need to tend to the quality of relationships inside.

In a world of human alienation and hostility, it is the church's vocation to provide unity, shelter, nurture, and fellowship. When that provision is made, we can participate in Christian disciplines as means of grace, in order that we may develop ears that hear God's Word, eyes that see the Spirit's movement, and lives that follow God's new way in the world.

The late American theologian, Nelle Morton, wrote an autobiography which she gave the title *The Journey Is Home*. In it she suggests that while many of us are far from the land of our birth, and far from the land of our dreams, it does not mean that we are far from home. "The journey is home", she suggests, and the people around us - whatever their backgrounds - are our neighbors. And so we are called, even in our "exile", to proclaim God's word, to strive for justice and peace, to seek the welfare of the city where we dwell. Maybe that's why Maya

Angelou has written: "You can never go home again, but the truth is you can never leave home, so it's all right."

Making God's house a home is an essential grace, necessary for life in this feverishly competitive, fragilely --connected, sometimes arctically cold, world. We are called to build community in the midst of isolated individualism and self-absorption, ministering to others within a self-serving society and praying for God's gracious presence in a culture of self-reliance.

"the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God." It is a "great end," a noble mission, an endeavor that is noble, right, just and pure.

Closing Prayer:

Grant that the journeys on which we find ourselves may offer us all the wonders of home. Bless us with true friends, neighbors and companions, with relationships founded in faith, love mercy and grace.

[1] Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) p. 1.