

February 2, 2014

The National Presbyterian Church

Great Ends of The Church: “Time to Grow Up?”

Ephesians 4:11-16, 1 Peter 2:1-5

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In our Sunday sermons from January through the first Sunday in March we’re thinking together about the purpose of the *church* of Jesus Christ – why Christianity is not just a solitary endeavor, why Christianity is not just a one-on-one relationship with God –

. . . though it is and it must be; and if you do not have that one-on-one relationship with God then today is the “day of salvation,” today is the day when you need to come before God and say “This is what you want. I give my life to You, one-on-one as if there were no other.” He loves us and wants that. Jesus says to us that he knows our names. He knows the number of hairs on our head. He cares for us one-on-one . . .

– but Jesus also in his ministry in meeting with individuals brought those individuals immediately together into a community, into a gathering of disciples that would become his church. He has a passion not just for your life and mine, but for our community life, together. And we are thinking together about this aspect of the Christian faith: this corporate aspect of the Christian faith. And we’re doing so with the help of a group of six statements that come from our Presbyterian Constitution called “***The Great Ends (or great purposes) of the Church.***”

1. The Proclamation of the Gospel for the Salvation of Humankind
2. The Shelter, Nurture, and Spiritual Fellowship of the Children of God
3. The Maintenance of Divine Worship
4. The Preservation of the Truth
5. The Promotion of Social Righteousness, and
6. The Exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the World.

They’re in the Presbyterian Constitution (*Book of Order*, F-1.0304) but they’re not merely Presbyterian: Christians of many denominations would agree that these statements also provide for them a solid rationale or purpose for their corporate life together as followers of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the past couple of weeks we have focused on the first of these great ends, the *Proclamation of the Gospel for the Salvation of Humankind*. That’s one of our great purposes as a church – a task too great to do by myself, or by yourself, that we have been called to do together – to proclaim the good news of God’s creation and redemption through our Lord Jesus

Christ, to proclaim the good news of God's passion for reconciliation with us (with the world, with all humankind) so that we might enter a saving eternal relationship with him.

This may seem to be a proud or an arrogant thing to say, that you and I have been given a vital and unique message to proclaim to the world – except for the fact that all kinds of people believe that they too have been given unique and vital messages (and products) which they are eager to “proclaim to the world!”

Tonight many of you will look at the Super Bowl not only to see the football, but to watch the halftime show, and perhaps even (and maybe especially) the ads. It's a package deal! There are people out there who have been waiting for this moment, to share with you their version of “the gospel” – some sort of good news that will save you in some fashion; good news that you desperately need to hear about some idea or product that will “bless” you and (no doubt) all humankind as well. And they are focused on this proclamation, willing to pay big bucks for their few seconds of proclamation.

And it's within this mix, where all kinds of people are preaching all kinds of gospels, that we Christians as a church humbly say that we too have been entrusted with a message, one that is not of our own creation, given to us by God, through which we and all people can be blessed or saved. This is our calling, not just as individuals but together as a church: *the Proclamation of the Gospel for the Salvation of Humankind*. That is the first of The Great Ends.

Today we move on to the second of The Great Ends: *The Shelter, Nurture and Spiritual Fellowship of the Children of God*. The shelter, and the nurture, and the spiritual fellowship of the children of God. This is a statement that tells us that a significant part of our call and purpose together is to create an environment, to create a community in which there is that kind of shelter (protection and safety), that kind of spiritual fellowship (depth of relationship) in which people will be nurtured, in which they will find themselves growing not only in faith but in every dimension of their life. We are God's children, and like any parent, God is passionate about our growth. And the church is to be that environment, that community within which that nurture, that growth takes place. We all know that there are some environments, some communities, that are nurturing; and that there are some communities, unfortunately, which are not.

This past Thursday in the Washington Post there was fascinating article about the life of a 31-year old young man by the name of Izidor Ruckel (*A Lost Boy finds his Calling*, by Tara Bahrapour, WP, Jan.30, 2014). Izidor spent the first 11 years of his life in a Romanian orphanage before being adopted by a family in San Diego. In the orphanage many of the children were beaten, some were put in straight-jackets, some were placed in cages. It was a terrible, terrible place, hidden from the world until the journalists and cameras of the ABC program “20-20” arrived in 1989 and shared with the world what was going on. Once the tragedy was exposed, a spate of adoptions began, and among those adoptions was Izidor's. And with that adoption his life was changed. Completely. Radically. Overnight he was pulled out of one environment and dropped into another. He

was plucked out of an environment that was destructive and deadly, crushing his life, body and soul (he was eleven years old at the time, but it was estimated that developmentally he was probably closer to six), and transferred to a whole new environment within which he could thrive, grow in all kinds of positive ways.

The adoption didn't end of all his problems (the story is honest in sharing that life has often been difficult for Izidor since then: the scars remain). But in returning to his native Romania and seeing the lives of those he had known as a child, who had stayed in the orphanage all their childhood, Izidor graphically saw the blessing and power of escaping from one environment and moving to another.

Some environments are toxic. Some are deadly and deadening. Some, on the other hand, are liberating and life-giving; they lead to growth and change, seemingly spontaneously or inescapably. Community and corporate environment matters!

- Which is why parents, of course, are always looking for the best schools for their children. We want the best environment within which our children can learn and grow. For some it's just a matter of finding the right teacher, while for others it's a matter of finding the right group of friends. Some children flourish within a small classroom or school, while others flourish in a larger group. Some children grow best in a less structured environment, while others grow best in one that is clearly structured. The right environment will vary from child to child, and so it's natural for parents to pour energy into seeking out the right educational environment for their children.
- And the same is true in business. Think of Silicon Valley firms which spend a great deal of money, time, energy and effort creating the right work environment: spaces and places in which ideas can flow, in which people can be creative together, not just once but repeatedly, year after year.

This understanding of the importance of community and environment pervades secular society – and God wants it to pervade the spiritual realm as well. Indeed, this is what the Church has been called to do and be; *to be the kind of environment that provides shelter and spiritual fellowship so that nurture and growth, can take place, as it were, almost spontaneously for the children of God.*

And that's who we are: Children of God! Which means that God is a parent! And as a parent of the children of God, ***God is passionate about our growth.*** Like any good parent, God is hurt when your life and mine are stagnant, when there is no growth. God is passionate about providing that kind of atmosphere, that kind of community in which his children can flourish every day of their lives. Not just spiritually but in every area; in our work, in our homes, in the church, in the area of knowledge and relationships and character.

We have to ask ourselves “Are we growing?” This is what our Heavenly Father wants! Or “Are we stuck?” Have we been moving forward, or standing still for a while? Where are we in this journey, knowing that this is God's passion, our Father's passion, for us?

Indeed, the scriptures teach us that God is so passionate about our growth that he will resort to pretty much anything to help us keep growing: even suffering, trouble and difficulty. He did this with Jesus so he will do this with us.

In the letter of the Hebrews in the fifth chapter we read these words that “*Jesus learned obedience through the things that he suffered.*” Jesus learned obedience through the things that he suffered. Though he was the Son of God he didn’t get a free ride! He didn’t come into this world knowing everything about everything, but learned by experience, from good experiences (for example, his parents) – and excruciatingly hard experiences (his rejection, suffering and death)! Just as you and I do. And just as every hero and heroine in Scripture did.

As you work your way through the pages of the Bible you find that time and time again progress in the lives of God’s people repeatedly took place through difficulties, through trials and tribulations. So you have

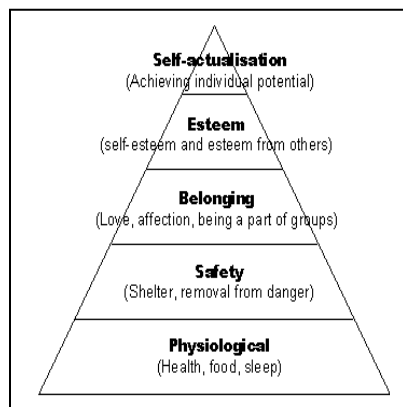
- Jacob facing disappointment year after year working for his unscrupulous father-in-law; and through it he grows in patience.
- Joseph languishing in a prison forgotten and through that languishing he grows in trust.
- Ruth dealing with grief, enormous loss and through that loss she grows in faithfulness.
- Moses making a huge mistake with his life and being in the wilderness for 40 years and through that time he grows in his understanding of God’s timing and call.
- Or Esther being challenged to go into a place of danger and through that trouble she grows in courage.
- Or Paul facing persecution. Again and again and through that persecution he grows in his understanding of God’s faithfulness in all circumstances: indeed, he writes these words about the impact of that suffering in his life in the fifth chapter of Romans: “*we even boast in our sufferings knowing that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us.*”

As a parent, God is so passionate that our lives not remain stagnant that he will use any means at all, including problems and difficulties, trials and tribulations to promote our growth.

But it’s not just through troubles that God wants us to grow, not just through dark or heavy experiences, by themselves, but *through his gift to us of a community in which there is an abiding sense of safety and security* that pervades all of our experiences, whether easy or hard, good or bad; through the sense that no matter what risks we take or failures we meet, or opportunities we are given, or miss, we have been and will be sheltered and protected by God, within relationships with God and others that nothing will break for all eternity. Through Jesus

Christ, God gives to us a commitment and a community, which can never be shaken. With such a foundation, no matter what troubles we face, our lives can always be moving forward – growing!

Do you know or remember Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs? In the 1940s Maslow developed a pyramid of needs leading to what a human being ought to grow to become, what he called a "self-actualized human being." To Maslow, self-actualization is when we have grown personally to the point when we have become creatively and morally fulfilled and have a sense of freedom. This is what he says our lives are to be. But what he also says is this: that you can't get there, you cannot get to the point of self-actualization unless some specific needs are met along the way. ***You not only need your biological and physiological needs met***, taken care of, you need air, you need food and drink. These are basic needs that must be met; *otherwise we never are going to grow*. ***But you also need your safety needs met, he says***. If you are constantly struggling to be safe you have no sense of protection from the elements or from other people, if you are constantly in fear you will never grow to become self-actualized (like Izidor and the children in the orphanage). You need that safety need met. ***He says you also need your social needs met***. You need a sense of belonging, a sense of affection and love from family and friends.



And you also need your self-esteem needs met. You need to know that people respect you whether through what you've done or through who you are. You need those things. And if you have those at the foundation of life then you'll find yourself growing.

And this is surely what God wants for us – through the Gospel and through the Church *as a community* – to be that kind of environment which provides for us, and assures us that all kinds of needs will be taken care of.

- Jesus comes to earth as the Son of God to give us spiritual life, but he doesn't simply live in the clouds above our material world, but gets down to ground level, feeding the hungry and healing the sick; dealing with *biological and physiological needs*.

This is our task too, as a church.

- And when people are criticized and condemned by others, Jesus sits with them and defends them from those who would attack them. He provides safety for the weak and sinful.

Surely the church is to be that place where we ought to feel safe to ask our questions and express our doubts as well as to declare our faith! When we bear our souls, of all places, the church should not be the place that diminishes or demeans us, but supports us and helps us grow *in safety*.

- And not only is Jesus interested in our safety needs or our physiological needs, but he is also interested in *our social needs and our need for self-esteem*. Despite our sin, despite what we have "done that we ought not to have done," or "left undone that we

ought to have done,” he tells us that he loves us with an everlasting love, and that he calls his followers into a relationship with God and each other that nothing in heaven or earth can sever. Nothing, says the Apostle Paul, “*can separate us from the love of God made known in Christ Jesus our Lord*” (Romans 8:39).

This is a relationship which was established in the soil of the earth on which the cross of Christ was planted, and is symbolized at the communion table to which we come in a few moments. It’s the table of “communion” – not only of “unbreakable relationship with God” but also of “unbreakable relationship with one another.”

So our prayer at this table should not only be that we meet God here, and have a sense that God wants to invade our lives individually through this bread and this wine to touch us and help us, and feed us – *so that we grow individually as followers of Christ*; but that at this table we would also *grow closer together* in communion with each other; that a bond is created by God’s Holy Spirit which strengthens us as a church, to be that *positive environment of shelter and spiritual fellowship within which the power of God’s life to nurture us, to help us grow is unleashed for all who enter the community.*

The apostle Paul reflecting on the place of the church in the growth that God is passionate to see in our lives, says this to the church in Ephesus (and to you and me):

*Speaking the truth in love we must grow up in every way and to him who is the head, into Christ from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly promotes **the body’s growth** in building itself up in love.* Eph 4:15-16

God’s passion is for our growth into Christ. But growth is only assured if each part of the community is working properly. This is corporate Christianity at work! We may say of ourselves, “*I’m just a ligament, I’m just a fingernail, I don’t add up to much.*” And it may be true! But when our solitary lives are joined together with others, when all the parts are connected together, my life to yours, yours to mine, then God promises us that growth WILL happen!

Saint Peter uses a different image as he writes to the churches of Asia Minor. He says:

*“Like newborn infants long for the pure spiritual milk so that by it you may **grow** into salvation. Come to him, a living stone to Jesus Christ. Though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight and like living stones let yourselves be built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.* 1 Peter 2:2-5

This time the image is not of a body but of a building. But each and every part still matters. I may just be a solitary stone, or a little piece of rock, but God says, “*When you place your life into connection with another, on top of Jesus Christ the cornerstone I will do something with your life that you can never do alone; I will build your life into a community of safety from which we can live adventurous and growing lives for God. This is what I want to do with you,*” says God. Not

just individually but together. The world is watching and waiting not just for faithful witnesses one-on-one to Jesus Christ, who have a love for Christ that we see and is obvious (though we need that) but for people, a community which, when people see it, they say “*Ah, if I live in that community, that positive, powerful environment, I will grow. That’s where I want to be!*”

When I first came to this country I was 19 years of age. I was a shy young student spending a year in upstate New York and I had a remarkable year – made many friends. But the highlight of my year was the church that I found. There was a pastor there who changed my life but it wasn’t just the pastor. It wasn’t just one person who changed my life. It was the meeting of all kinds of adults whose faith was real who would invite us students to their homes for lunch after almost every service, and in those homes we would have discussions around the table on every topic imaginable. We could ask our embarrassing questions. We could bare our souls, and through that back and forth, that nurturing environment I and the other students grew in our faith in our Savior. The church as a community changed my life forever.

This is what we at National have been called to be, what every church has been called to be. Through the power of God’s spirit may we fulfill our purpose to be *a community of constant growth: providing nurture, shelter and spiritual fellowship for the children of God.*

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