

“A Community of Nurture”
Isaiah 58:6-11; Mark 1:1; 2:1-12
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We are at the end of our four-week series, and as I said at the beginning, we have a remarkable opportunity now to examine who we are and what our church is about, and what is our vision for the future. In this interim time of transition as we prepare ourselves to begin our search for a new pastor, it gives us a chance for discernment and growth.

We have started with the understanding that “church” means not this place, but we, ourselves, the people of God in our daily lives, the ***ecclesia***, the “called out” ones.

A second “given” is that our life together begins and ends with the worship of God; it is our primary purpose and the source of our strength. But then, what shall we do with that strength? To guide our discernment, we have looked at three historic Great Ends of the Church:

- First, we are called to be “Messengers of the Good News of the Gospel,” knowing the story of God’s salvation and living it out in our daily lives;
- Second, we are called to be “Justice-Makers,” not only through the activities of the church, but in every aspect of our economic and political activity; and
- Third, today, we are called to be a “Community of Nurture,” in which the children of God can find shelter and peace.

Marjorie Thompson in her lovely book, *Soul Feast*,” writes:

“There is a hunger abroad in our time; 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 culture, it reveals that something is missing from the diet of our rational, secular, and affluent culture.”¹

¹ *Soul Feast* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), p. 1, cited by Joseph Small in *The Great Ends of the Church* (Louisville: Witherspoon Press, 2003), p. 11

If you think that's an overstatement, walk into any bookstore and take in the shelves of self-help and spirituality.

Lutheran pastor Rick Barger suggests that even the proximity of these two departments "speaks volumes about the spiritual hunger of our culture" Indeed, Barger says,

"Many come into a *worship* service not sure of what they want but know that they need 'something.'" ²

What is it that you need? What are you hungry for? Most of us come to worship hungry for something.

- Maybe it's a hunger for healing of strained relationships, or for the healing of our bodies from our chronic pain or physical illness.
- Maybe it's a hunger for meaning, a longing for something more than what our wonderful way of life and stunning vacations provide.
- Maybe it's a hunger to feel adequate and affirmed, or forgiven for our less than pleasing behavior, or simply a yearning to be comforted after a tough week in the trenches.
- Maybe it's a hunger for rest, for reprieve from our busy schedules or the tyranny of cell phones, text messages, and countless e-mail, rest from the nagging sense of never having or being "enough."

My guess is most of us come here hungry for something, even if we cannot name it.

The question is how shall we fill that hunger?

Joe Small of our denomination's Office of Theology and Worship notes:

"There is no shortage of restaurants offering to fill our emptiness, from the fast food of New Age crystals and pyramids to the five-star cuisine of ancient Asian religions, the

² *A New and Right Spirit: Creating an authentic Church in a Consumer Culture* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2005) p. 84.

menus are many and varied. Is the church just one more café on restaurant row?”³

As I have said at various times in my sermons these past weeks: “Am I getting what I want or need out of church?” is the wrong question.

That may have bothered some of you, because many of you come here hungering and thirsting with real needs in your hearts.

Today, as we approach the third and final Great End – as we look at what it means to “provide the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God,” I want to acknowledge that need. And I hope that you will understand more fully what I mean to say to you: not that your needs don’t matter, but that all the church programs and good causes in the world cannot meet those needs.

If we come to faith like consumers do when they go to a store, we will be disappointed. Only when we come into *relationship* with God – as a family in a home -- can we find ourselves filled. And when we do -- when we come home to the presence of the living God, and trust the Lord to feed our deepest hungers, I promise you: we *will* be satisfied.

As the prophet Isaiah says in today’s Old Testament lesson,

“The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places.”⁴

The ancient church father, St. Augustine, said it this way:

“Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.”⁵

Our hearts are restless until they find their way home.

As we look at the last of the three Great Ends of our church – “the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God,”

³ Joseph Small, *The Great Ends of the Church*, p. 12

⁴ Isaiah 58: 11

⁵ “Confessions of St. Augustine,” Book 1, Chapter 1

I am reminded of a story Ann Lamott tells. When the pastor of her church was a little girl of seven years old, her best friend got lost one day.

“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 very 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.’”

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, and hear their (tawny) voices, I can always find my way home”⁶

It’s so easy to get lost these days.

- To get lost in the arbitrary competition for status.
- To get lost in the artificial requirements of beauty.
- To get lost in the empty promises of money.
- To get lost in the frenetic busy-ness of our lives.

It’s so easy to get lost these days. It’s a wonder we find our way home at all.

But to me, our spiritual home is much more than just a place of safety. Our spiritual home is where we remember – or maybe even learn – who it is we really are ... where the things that really matter are reinforced, and the values we cherish are etched into our hearts so we don’t forget them.

My mother often said to me as I was growing up: “Donnie, remember who you are.” Remember whose name you bear. Remember whose house you belong to. Remember where you come from.

⁶ *Traveling Mercies*, “Overture: Lily Pads,” p. 55

We have been baptized into the church family and in baptism we celebrated our true identity in the household of Jesus Christ. As we are baptized we are welcomed and received as children of the covenant, we are sealed by the Holy Spirit, and we are marked as Christ's own forever.

Like growing up in a family, the meaning of our identity doesn't become clear all at once, but takes hold over time. I didn't always appreciate my mother saying to me "remember who you are," but now over 67 years later, I do.

As children of God, as we grow in the faith, as we learn how to interact and treat each other with decency and respect, and how to love and be loved, we learn what it means to be children of God.

Dear friends, a huge part of being the church is learning what it means to be children of God, what it means to come home to God's house.

We continue to increasingly learn how to treat each other with respect and decency. We are learning, gradually, the language, the culture, the household rules. We are learning the intimate privilege of calling God, "Abba, Father." We are learning the family story:

- How God has many children, but loves each one of us;
- How God keeps looking after us, even when we've behaved badly;
- How God sets appropriate limits for us, and natural consequences when we make mistakes;
- 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.

We are not learning all this on our own: Christ himself came to us, to show us the way; and indeed, we've been blessed with our brothers and sisters in Christ all around us, to help us, to show us the ropes, to help us be part of the family. And when we forget who we are, or when we get lost and cannot find our way home, or when we are so broken that we cannot get back on our own, they do what we cannot

do on our own: **they bring us back home** ... even if it means taking off the very roof to bring us in.

This is the power of the Christian community. I love the gospel story that we read today, the story of the paralytic:

Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven." (Mark 2: 3 – 5)

Chances are you've been on one side of this equation or the other, and maybe you've been on both: the one who is carried in to Jesus' home, or the one who does the carrying.

We are hungry, all of us. And often we are lost. But God provides for us a place of healing, a place of belonging, a family of faith in which we discover who we really are, a place in which we find our way home.

My dearest hope in the weeks ahead is that we examine our life together well – to discern how we might align ourselves even more with this crucial purpose.

"[And] 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"⁷

On this World Wide Communion Sunday as we come forward to receive the bread of life and the cup of salvation, let us pray:

"O Lord, our hearts are restless till they find their rest in thee,"⁸

O Lord, our hearts are restless until they find their way home. **Amen**

⁷ *Traveling Mercies*, "Overture: Lily Pads," p. 55

⁸ St. Augustine