

Great Ends of the Church I: The shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God  
Based on Luke 10: 38-42  
July 17, 2022  
Cape May Presbyterian Church  
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There is a series of statements at the beginning of the Presbyterian Book of Order, known as the Great Ends of the Church. These six statements were first published in 1910 and I just learned that we don't actually know who wrote them or exactly where they came from. It's all somewhat shrouded in the history of our denomination's many schisms and reunions.

What we do know about them is that they are bold. They outline the church's reasons for existing. I don't know if you've ever wondered why the church exists, exactly. Many people outside the church wonder. Other people outside the church don't bother to wonder, but assume that the church has some foolish or petty reasons for existing.

I'm actually going to give you homework right now, before I go any further. This week, I want you to ask someone who does not go to church what they think the church is for. Or ask someone who does go to church what the church is for. What is the church's reason for being? And then ask yourself. I'm going to make this question a post on our Facebook page, so you can post your answers in the comments there if you do FB. But there will be also be a quiz on this next Sunday.

Most of us who come to church would include in our answer, I think, the idea that we exist to worship God. Maybe that would be our whole answer. But whoever wrote the Great Ends of the church believed there was a lot more to it. So here they are, according to our Book of Order, the six reasons why there needs to be a 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
- 6) The exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world

Let me just read those one more time, with feeling.

- 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**—That's our job.
- 5) The promotion of social righteousness—that too. And if all of that wasn't enough, just so you know, we are here for
- 6) **The exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world**

Those are very lofty purposes. And we may not agree with them; we may have qualms about some of them or we may want to add others. But at the very least, these are an excellent place to begin a conversation about what the church is, now, and what it is called to be. What the church is for. Because it does seem to me that we're not always clear, as a denomination or as mainline Protestants—what is our purpose, and what should it be. We have lovely traditions and songs and history, but surely we do not exist only to pay tribute to traditions.

So over the next six weeks, Ben and I are going to take each of these Great Ends in turn, and see where it's coming from in scripture and see how it works or doesn't work in the life of our church and the life of the church universal.

But we're not beginning with number 1, which is the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind. I wanted to start with a somewhat easier one, and it happens to be one that gibes with the lectionary text for today, the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God.

That's one of the reasons we exist. It's surely not one of the Great Ends that we'd have any hesitation about embracing. We exist, as a church, as the church, to welcome, to feed, to teach, to feed, to embrace, to love people. People who need a friend, people who need a soft place to land—and who doesn't? We are here to do the work of welcome.

Sort of like Martha. Martha is the host, the welcomer. It's her house, we are told. She wants to do the host things—to literally shelter and nurture, with a roof and food and clean water to wash Jesus' feet and probably cushions or who knows what her homemaking, hostessing duties consist of. We sort of assume that Martha is busy welcoming Jesus, though we're never told what she is doing. We're just told that "Martha was distracted by her many tasks," but left to wonder what they were. We quickly imagine cooking and dishes and laundry. For all we know she was building an addition on the house so that Jesus could stay longer. Whatever she's doing, she finds it a burden. To the extent she asks Jesus—tell Mary to help me, I'm doing all the work by myself! All the work of being your host. It's kind of funny that Martha is being such a good hostess that she basically complains *to her guest* about how hard it is to do this good of a job.

I've preached about hospitality a lot, here and elsewhere and I've led many Bible studies on the subject over the years. But only here at Cape May Presbyterian, when I asked what comes to your mind when you hear the word, "Hospitality," only here in this unique community were the responses to that question, "laundry," "work," "tired," and so on. Not "warmth," "laughter," "welcome." We are, it seems, a whole city of Marthas.

I get it! I have totally been in Martha's shoes. This past May, I had a houseful of friends and family—it's a lot! Cooking, dishes, laundry, groceries, making sure everyone has sunscreen, a snack, and a beach pass at the appropriate time. Sometimes it feels like work, and thank goodness that in our culture—at least at my house!--it's ok to say, hey, maybe someone else could do the dishes today. I'm not sure Martha could have asked her guest, Jesus, to help out, without disgracing herself as a hostess. You would think it could have been pretty easy for him,

if he put his mind to it. He could have taken one little loaf of bread and boom, everybody has dinner. But she can't ask him. Instead, she asks him to tell her sister—*Mary* needs to help.

Welcome can be work, though we hope it is joyous work. It's the Martha stuff—literally shelter, literally nurture, as in food, clean water, a soft place to land. And it's also making room for Mary to sit and listen. It's even letting Martha be Mary sometimes.

One of my favorite lines in *Fiddler on the Roof* is in the song Tradition—the mama's job is to make a proper home, a quiet home, a kosher home, she must raise a family and run the home, "so Papa's free to read the Holy Book." Prayer and contemplation, reading and raising one's eyes heavenward, there has to be room for these things in people's lives. And there is work to be done to make that room.

We do the Back-to-School Fair to ease the rushing and running and spending and anxiety that often comes with getting kids ready for a new school year. That is part of what we do to provide for the shelter and nurture of the children of God. We buy the school supplies, have them here all in one place, so there are less car trips, less money spent, and a few more minutes in the last few weeks of summer for the family to be together, maybe talk about what they're excited about, maybe talk about what they're nervous about. Maybe just go to Fleck's for ice cream one more time before the season's over. We do just a little of the martha jobs in their lives, so that they have just a little more of a chance to be Mary, to sit and listen and appreciate.

Some of what we do to shelter and nurture the children of God is done so that those we shelter and nurture can have time for the spiritual fellowship. But some of what we do is to provide time and space for the spiritual fellowship—for ourselves as children of God and for all who seek it here. There is room here to sit in quiet on a Monday or Weds morning. Room in one service or the other for pretty much anyone to feel the spirit moving. Room in our coffee hours and Bible studies and potlucks for laughter and learning and really good food.

It's our job, to provide those places for each person to be embraced, to be inspired, and to feel God's love through the fellowship of others.

One thing that came out of the recent General Assembly was our need, as American Christians, to understand more deeply what brings people from Mexico, and from Central and South America, to our borders. A study group on Central America reported that "The question in Honduras isn't so much the one asked north of the border, ... which is often something like, "Why do those people continue to want to come here?" ... the question people in Honduras often ask is simply, "Where is God?" ("¿Dónde está Dios?") It is both a lament and a serious question," the report tells us, "about the role of the church and church people faced with political upheaval, economic disarray, and family disintegration caused at times even by successful migration when families are separated by national borders for years at a time."

There are many in our world who lack shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship—at least one if not all of those three things. That's why we're here, sitting at the feet of Jesus, even as we also do the work of welcome.