

**Sermon Series: The Great Ends of the Church**  
**The Proclamation of the Gospel for the Salvation of Humankind**  
**Matthew 28: 18 – 20**  
**July 26, 2009**

Have you ever wondered what church is all about? We all have our own reasons for coming to church, good reasons, like worshipping God, growing in our faith, fellowshiping with other believers. But have you ever stopped to think about what our purpose is as a church? Why are we here? What is the church supposed to do?

Rick Warren's popular book *The Purpose Driven Church* was embraced as a new way of thinking about being church. But did you know that for us as Presbyterians, we have a purpose that was formulated over 100 years ago? It sets out what the church is supposed to do, what our purpose is as a church, our reason for being. This statement is called *The Great Ends of the Church*. The Great Ends of the Church. We were talking about the Great Ends in our prayer service last week, and one person said, When I first hear the term the Great Ends, I think about the end of something. But what you are talking about are actually the Great Goals of the church. And I said, yes, that's it exactly. The Great goals of the church.

The six Great Ends of the Church are spelled out in our Book of Order. The Book of Order is part of the constitution of the Presbyterian denomination. We sometimes think of the Book of Order as a bunch of rules, but the Book of Order really talks about what we do as a church AND why we do it. It contains some wonderfully deep and rich theology. The very first chapter of the Book of Order talks about how Christ is the Head of the Church, and everything that we are comes from him.

In 1904, Presbyterians put the purpose of the church into words when they wrote the six Great Ends. For over 100 years, these statements have guided the mission of the Presbyterian Church.

Most of us, though, don't read the Book of Order on a regular basis. So we need to remind ourselves about what our purpose is. The six Great Ends are spelled out for you on the insert in your bulletin this morning. They are -- the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the kingdom of God to the world. Over the next six weeks, we'll focus on one of these great ends each Sunday.

And we'll find that while these statements are deep and true, they also have very practical meaning in our daily lives. Today's sermon is about proclaiming the gospel, and the text that I chose that seems to most fit this particular purpose is the passage we just heard from Matthew known as the Great Commission.

Just before this passage, the disciples learned that Jesus, who had been crucified, was risen! He was alive, and he called his disciples to him to give them one final word of instruction before he ascended to heaven.

Jesus had spent his ministry teaching them and shaping them to be his disciples. Now here was his last opportunity, his last moment to be with them again on earth. In this crucial moment, we would expect Jesus' words to the disciple to be vitally important, to crystallize what was at the heart of his ministry. Of all the things that Jesus could have said, this is what he chose to be the parting statement that he left with his disciples: "Go therefore and make disciples of all

nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”

This commandment is called the Great Commission, because of its importance among the teachings of Jesus and because of the scope of its ministry. Go to all nations, teaching them to obey all that I have commanded. It was a big task for the disciples, and it is a big task for us who are Jesus’ disciples today.

It is that task that is spelled out in this first Great End: the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind.

The first thing that we need to understand about proclaiming the gospel is that we need to take the church to people.

For many years Christianity was not a legitimate religion, but then in the time of the emperor Constantine, Christianity was established as the official religion of the empire. It had tremendous influence in the shaping of civilization.

Jump ahead a number of centuries to the beginning of our country. At the time the United States began, most of the people who settled here were Christians—Protestant Christians. Even though there was separation of church and state, there still was what has been called a “functional Christendom.” In other words, Christianity was understood to be The religion, and churches played a major role in public life, shaping public policy, morality, and institutions (*The Missional Church, ed. By Darrell Guder. P. 51*).

In our more recent history, in the 1950’s church and government seemed like partners, walking hand-in-hand. There was prayer (Christian prayer) and scripture reading in public schools, laws that prohibited businesses from being open on Sundays. It was taken for granted that people were Christians, that they went to church, that they shared common Christian values.

Far from the situation when Peter and the other early Christians were persecuted for their faith, U.S. life in the 1950's was more like it was when Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the empire.

Then came the 60's. Radical changes swept every segment of American society. Then came the technological explosion that brings new changes to our lives almost daily. There's no need to go into all the reasons why things changed—we all know that it has changed. We live in a very different world than we did a few decades ago. Among the many changes are the changes in the religious landscape. We can no longer assume that everyone we know is a Christian. We can no longer assume that all of our neighbors are going to be in church Sunday morning. Those who study the relationship of church and society say that the world we live in today is much more like the world of the early Christians than like the world of Constantine. This requires us as Christians to think and act differently than we may have in years gone by. We have to understand the role the church today needs to play in our society. What kind of church do we need to be?

We no longer live in a time when the church can open its doors and sit back and wait for people to come to us, to come to this place simply because it is a church. We need to take church out to the people. This is what the first disciples did. They followed Jesus command to go and make disciples. The Greek word for go actually means, "Move out!" (Bruner, 815). It is a dynamic command, not a static one. They were not to stay where they were, they were not to hide behind locked doors, they were not to be afraid or ashamed of being Jesus' followers. They were to go, to move out, sharing the good news about Jesus with all nations.

They did not have a building that was the church building. They understood that church was not a place but a people—the body of Christ, those filled by his Spirit and commissioned to

go forth to make disciples. So they went out and they preached and they taught and they healed. They cared for one another and by their example showed what Jesus' love is all about.

And now it is our turn. We, too, must obey Jesus' command. We are to go and evangelize. Evangelize.

We Presbyterians are not real big on the subject of evangelism. There are images of evangelism that we conceive as negative, things that we Presbyterians just don't do. We tend to think of evangelism as a street preacher standing on the corner and waving his Bible in the air, shouting verses and imploring the passers by to repent. That is what we often think of when we hear the word evangelism. We recognize that some forms of evangelism may do more harm than good, especially those that are harsh or judgmental.

But I wonder if our reluctance to evangelize is really about our desire to be sensitive and inclusive or if it has something to do with our fear.

Are we afraid to evangelize? Does the thought of sharing your faith with someone make your tongue tie and your knees knock and your body break out in a cold sweat?

Maybe we have an unreasonable fear that is holding us back from what we should do.

We human beings have unreasonable fears about a lot of things. How many of you are afraid of snakes? Did you know that you have a much greater chance of dying from contact with a sharp object than from a snake bite? A lot of people are afraid of heights. But you actually have about twice as great a chance of dying from falling out of bed as from falling from a high place. With all the salmonella scares lately, that's been on a lot of people's minds. But you actually have a greater chance of dying from appendicitis! And of course, everyone knows that there is a greater risk of being killed in a car crash than in airplane crash, but it's not riding in a

car that we are afraid of ([www.nsc.org/research/odds/asp](http://www.nsc.org/research/odds/asp)x and “Managing Fear and Risk,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 7, 2008).

What do we think is going to happen if we share our faith? The early disciples faced some real fears, didn't they? They had to worry about being thrown to lions, or drawn and quartered, or beheaded, or crucified upside down.

What do we have to worry about? We worry that we might feel awkward or look silly. That we might say the wrong thing and feel foolish. We worry that we might fail.

Friends, this is one of the most important things Jesus ever said to us. This is what he wanted to impart at the end of his ministry, the work that he had done that we are now to carry on. The first disciples risked their lives for this. What do we risk? Our pride? Our comfort? Surely we can risk that much.

Sharing our faith doesn't have to be awkward or contrived. We don't have to knock on doors or stop people we don't know on the street. Sharing our faith should be as natural as sitting down to have a cup of coffee with someone. You're talking to a good friend. She says, “I just don't know what I'm going to do with my daughter. Ever since she turned 16, she's broken rules, she stays out too late, her grades have gone down.” And you can say, “When my daughter went through that, the thing that really turned her life around was that our whole family started going to church together. Hearing God's word made a difference to all of us. It made all the difference in the world.” That's evangelism.

Or say your co-worker confides in you that life has gotten crazy for him. His wife is complaining that he's spending too much time at work, the kids are going a million different directions, and it feels like life is coming apart at the seams. And you can say, “You know, the thing that keeps me centered and grounded is my relationship with God. I spend time reading my

Bible and praying every day, and I go to church on Sundays and spend time with other Christians. That helps me keep things in the right order. I know that God loves me, and I want to love God and my family the way I should.” That’s evangelism.

And of course, when something good has happened, share how thankful you are to God for that. Talk about some new way you have experienced God, or something you’ve read in the Bible that meant a lot to you, or something that’s going on at church that you think a friend or co-worker would be interested in. Those are all ways that we evangelize. It’s simply sharing the good news about Jesus, about who he is and what he means to us.

Who do you know who needs the good news? Get to know your neighbors and your co-workers. Invite them to come to church with you, but also be the church to them. Find out how you can help them meet their practical needs. If you know someone who is new here, help them get acquainted in the community. Tell them a good place to buy groceries, run some errands for them, take them to the beach. Get to know and care for the people around you. This is what the early church did. They shared their possessions with one another. They healed the sick. They did good works and acts of charity. All in the name of Jesus. The specific needs of the people around us may be different from those in the first century, but the principle is the same. The church is people, witnessing to the good news of Christ with word and deed.

The second thing we need to understand is that we are sharing the good news ABOUT JESUS. We are not trying to sell people church programs, but helping them get to know a person.

If we are focused on the product that we get from church rather than on Jesus himself, we will not be able to witness effectively to others. You can get programs anywhere. Our community has many fine programs in terms of the arts and recreation. Schools have programs.

Our focus has to be on Jesus. That's the good news we have to share with others. The world doesn't need one more thing to choose and purchase. People are swamped, are glutted, with things, with goods and services. What they crave is relationships. Community. Here they can find the answer to their deepest needs. A relationship with God and with God's people which will sustain them in good times and in bad, will support them in times of trouble, will help them in raising their children, in being good parents and spouses. In letting them know that they are not all alone in the world. They are part of the family of a loving God. That's what we need to tell them when we tell them about our church.

And so this week, I hope that you will think about our first purpose as a church—the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind. Go and share the good news about Jesus. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Rev. Dawn M. Mayes  
First Presbyterian Church  
Brunswick, Georgia  
© Dawn M. Mayes 2009