

**Sermons Series: The Great Ends of the Church**  
**The Shelter, Nurture, and Spiritual Fellowship of the Children of God**  
**Matthew 25: 31 – 46**  
**August 2, 2009**

Judgment. It's not something we like to think about, but here it is, right in our Bibles, in front of us in black and white. This is a story of judgment. And it's not just any story. No, like last week's passage, Jesus' great commission, this passage comes at the end of Jesus life—a crucial time. This is the very last story that Jesus told in his public teaching ministry. And it is a story about judgment.

Like Jesus often did when he told stories, he uses images that the people would have been familiar with. Sheep and goats covered the landscape in Jesus' time. During the day, the sheep and goats roamed together, but at night, things changed. The goats liked to sleep in warmth, while the sheep liked the open air. So at the end of the day, the shepherd would come and separate them into two groups. Those listening to Jesus would have seen this happen many times; in fact, perhaps the sorting out was going on around them as Jesus spoke.

The shepherd puts the sheep on his right and the goats on his left, says Jesus. And this is where the parable takes on a meaning deeper than the reality of sheep and goats. In the parable, the sheep stand for the people of God, the righteous, while the goats stand for those who do not know God, the unrighteous. And the righteous received their reward, while the unrighteous went away into eternal punishment.

Now it goes without saying, that we all hope that the church would be among that flock of sheep. The church should be doing the things that Jesus is talking about in this parable: caring for those in need, welcoming those who need a place, nurturing those who need to grow. In some ways we can think of these things as a progression in the hierarchy of needs (Frederick

Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, Vol. 2, pp. 569-570). Food and water are at the base of the hierarchy. These are basic needs that people must have met in order to survive. Clothing and hospitality are the next step up in the hierarchy. And finally, being in community with people wherever they are is the highest step.

These are the kinds of things that are summed up in the second of the Great Ends of the Church. The shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God. Shelter has to do with meeting those most basic needs; Nurture involves the next step, the caring and hospitality. And finally spiritual fellowship is the creation of true community within the body of Christ. The shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God.

This is the second Sunday in our series on the Great Ends of the Church. As I said last week, the Great Ends, or Great Goals, are the purpose statement of the church. This statement is over 100 years old and should guide as we attempt to be the church that God is calling us to be. There's an insert in your bulletin that lists all six of the Great Ends.

In some ways, I think this is one of the most challenging Great Ends, because it encompasses so much. The shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God. If we look at it piece by piece, though, we can shed some light on how we go about accomplishing this particular end.

It may help to begin by thinking about who we mean when we say the children of God. Who are the children of God? All of us. Young and old, rich and poor, of every race and nation. And scripture makes clear that God's children are those both within the church and outside the church. God is the creator of all, and Jesus died for all. Our hope is that all God's children will come to know God and to embrace Jesus as Lord and Savior.

So our goal as the church is to reach all people. This relates to last week's passage, the great commission, where Jesus says to go and make disciples of ALL nations.

Last week we talked about proclaiming the gospel. We talked about sharing our faith with others, telling them about God, inviting them to church, sharing our own stories about our relationship with God. This week we see that in addition to telling, there is doing. Our purpose as a church is to tell, yes, but not just to tell. We also have to show, to show the good news, to show God's love. And we do this through the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God.

When you think about shelter, what comes to your mind? A roof over your head? A place of safety, of protection? A shelter can be a physical structure, a place to be out of the elements, with strong walls around you, where you are protected from rain or heat or cold. Shelter is the place where you feel safe, because there your needs are met.

In Jesus parable about the sheep and the goats, we hear Jesus talking about those who were hungry and thirsty. Even in our day and time, there are millions of people around the world who do not have their basic needs met. How can they learn about God when they are hungry? How can they understand God's love when they are thirsty?

This past week I heard someone speak at a Rotary meeting about a MAP International trip to Africa. Many of you are familiar with MAP, a Christian ministry based here in Brunswick but with operations all over the world. MAP helps meet some of those most basic needs. The speaker talked about villages in Africa where there was no clean drinking water. All sorts of diseases run rampant when people do not have fresh water to drink. One of the things that MAP does is help villages build wells to provide drinking water, and in so doing they are

eradicating diseases from entire countries. Our denomination has similar ministries all over the world, where we as the church are meeting basic needs in the name of Jesus.

There are people all over the world who literally do not have shelter, who do not have a roof over their heads. But the church is at work in those places. In homeless shelters all over this country, the church is at work, providing shelter. In Habitat for Humanity projects, the church provides shelter. When we volunteer in literacy programs or help someone find a job, we are helping them attain what they need to have shelter.

And Jesus says when you do it for the least of these, you are doing it to me. One of our purposes as a church is to provide shelter to the children of God, and so show them God's love.

We also are to provide nurture. This goes beyond the basic step of meeting needs to providing with hospitality, with love, and in relationship. I remember hearing a story a number of years ago after Hurricane Mitch devastated Honduras. Thousands of people lost their homes and everything they owned in the storm. One day a Methodist missionary was visiting with some of the victims, and an old school bus rolled down the lane past the shacks erected as temporary dwellings for those left homeless. "The windows of the bus opened," he said, and the people inside, some of whom were obviously foreigners, began to throw out black garbage bags filled with clothing and food." When he ran to the bus to investigate, he learned that the people were Europeans there to distribute aid, but they refused to get out of the bus! In talking with the local residents, the missionary learned that the incident was not uncommon. They reported that "foreigners would drive by at high speed and toss bags of used clothing and supplies from their car windows, putting the [hurricane victims] in danger of being hit by flying bags!" Their actions also provoked fights over who would get the supplies. The victims said, "They want to

help, but they're afraid of us . . . So they treat us like animals" (Paul Jeffrey. "What Happened to the Aid?" *Christian Century*, February 17, 1999, p. 172).

Contrast this to a story in our local paper last week about the Summer Camp Ministry at O Street Baptist Church. Did you see the pictures on the front page of Wednesday's paper? All summer long, the O Street Church has provided a camp for children who had no where else to go during the days of summer vacation. I happened to be at a meeting last week with the pastor of the O Street Church. He shared more about that inspiring ministry. These children were fed breakfast and lunch every day—their basic need, hunger, being met. But, he said, the most important part of the camp was the relationships the children developed with church members. They learned about God through learning Bible verses and Christian songs, they learned how to pray and talk about God. They gained self-confidence that they did not have before. That is a picture of the church providing nurture for God's children.

Of course, churches do this through ministries in the community but also through the ministries within the church. Sunday School for all ages, Bible studies, activities for children and youth. Opportunities for all of us to learn and grow together and be nurtured by one another.

Jesus said, I was naked and you clothed me, I was a stranger and you welcomed me. Not just providing but providing in relationship with others, welcoming, providing hospitality, is what we are called to do.

And then this leads to spiritual fellowship. Jesus said, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. These are relationships that go beyond teaching someone in Sunday School or sitting together in a Bible study. These are deep, spiritual relationships of being with people where they are, in whatever circumstance. When someone welcomes a new baby into the family, we rejoice with them, and we as the church make

promises in the child's baptism. We promise to guide and nurture the child by word and deed, with love and prayer, helping him to know and follow Jesus Christ and to become a faithful member of his church. That is spiritual fellowship.

When someone is sick, struggling with illness, the church is there, visiting and praying, yes, and also providing meals, running errands, driving them to the doctor or the drugstore, buying groceries. When a loved one dies, the church is there, helping to bear that burden by sharing in the grief, by helping in practical ways, and through the ministry of presence. There are times when words are not needed, and Christians being together in the presence of God is the most powerful thing to do. That is spiritual fellowship. We all have been through times when we have been sustained by that spiritual fellowship, when we have rejoiced in it and times of joy and when we have been born up by it in times of sorrow. That is part of what it means to be the church—to be in spiritual fellowship with one another, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

These are the things that we are to do as a church: provide shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship for the children of God.

In a book written about this particular Great End of the Church, Elizabeth Caldwell tells the story of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago. Today that church is one of the largest churches in our denomination, but it had a rough beginning. In 1871, the church had just completed and dedicated their first building and had had just one worship service in it when it was destroyed by the great Chicago fire. The church would not give up its call to be the church, so they rebuilt a new building. At its dedication service, James G. McClure, the president of McCormick Seminary said, "My soul's desire and prayer to God for this church is that its heart may be like unto the heart of God, that heart that loves every child of earth . . . O, that this church may be bigger than any one creed, sect or class or race or color. May it be so big that any

human being may feel at home here, may draw nigh to God here. May it be the mission of this church to tell every person in unmistakable terms how dear they are –preciously dear—to God, and then to live those words in the magnanimity of its welcome, the warmth of its fellowship, and the generosity of its devotion” (*Shelter, Nurture, and Spiritual Fellowship of the Children of God*, by Elizabeth F. Caldwell, pp. 21 – 22).

And so may it be for us, as we seek to fulfill our call in being God’s church in this place.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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