



## **Great Ends of the Church #2**

### *The Shelter, Nurture, and Spiritual Fellowship of the Children of God*

John 21:1-19

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Notes on the series: The Great Ends of the Church were formulated one hundred years ago by the United Presbyterian Church of North America, a Scots-Irish-derived, conservative denomination that merged with what is now the PC(USA) in 1958. These statements came about as a byproduct of a revision of their Constitution, and have been on the first page of our Book of Order ever since the union of our two denominations.

Great Ends? Well, let's call them primary purposes or fundamental tasks. They're what we're to do as the Church, by which I don't just mean Valley, but Church with a capital "C" – all believers in Christ. These are our goals as a corporate body – what we do as a group – but each of us has a part to play.

A United States Marine is supposed to be ready for nearly anything. So Marines are issued, basically, all the gear they need to do what needs to be done, just in case there's only one Marine left to do everything.

Which works pretty well – except when it comes to a place to sleep. In that case, there's a problem: each Marine is issued, or was in my day, not one tent, but a "Shelter, comma, Half." This thing, called a shelter-half, is a heavy, bulky, smelly piece of green canvas with a bunch of snaps down one side so that it can be attached to another shelter-half, thereby creating a shelter, whole – for two Marines. You need a buddy's half to make a place for either – or both – of you to sleep out of the rain (though you'll still get wet).

Awkward as that may be in the field – especially for a long time in the field (they're real small, too) – combining pieces to make a whole is very much like how the church operates, and this shows, especially when it comes to the second Great End of the Church: "The shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God." Doing these things, too, takes putting pieces together, and involves more than one person at a time. To put it very simply, this is the business of taking care of each other.

Why not just say that? Because we like big words. Because "taking care of each other" isn't quite enough: the words are very carefully chosen. Together, with our fellow

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believers, we are supposed to shelter (protect, provide a safe space – a sanctuary), nurture (feed, yes, but also guide and grow), and engage in spiritual fellowship (be a living community) – for the children of God. That means us. The Church (capital “C”) is called to do this – it’s what we do in the world. It is something that each of us is to be about, but it is done with others. Christians have been doing these things from the very first days of Christianity – the second chapter of Acts is all about this; think of Paul and Timothy, or Paul and any of his churches, how he cares for them, shepherds them. And we do these things today, too.

But they got the idea from Jesus and Jesus grows right out of the Hebrew scriptures. All of this is packed into our lesson from the Gospel of John today.

Now, since his resurrection, Jesus has appeared several times to different groups: the women at the tomb, the disciples huddling in a locked room, Thomas and company.

But despite this, the disciples are still adrift, still trying to find direction. We don’t know how long after Easter this event took place, but it’s at least a week or two.

(Scripture – with comments)

Peter, bless his heart, seems to be typical Peter here, ready to go and do *something*. He’s not a man inclined to hang around and wait, and nothing seems to be happening. So, he decides to go fishing.

Now, it’s not quite the same thing as you or I might do – certainly, today people go off and go fishing to get away from things; but for us, it’s a relaxing sport. For the disciples, it was going back to work to support themselves and their families – *and* getting away from things. But it is at least doing *something*, taking your mind off your worries. Without Jesus around, LIFE was closing in on them.

But this night, there’s no relief in fishing. As the dawn breaks, there’s no fish to show for their work. Funny; that’s happened before – that time Jesus helped them out. Maybe they’re even thinking, “Sure wish Jesus was here!”

Then a man calls from the shore: “Children, have you caught anything?”

John’s just taken us all the way back to the very beginning of his book, chapter 1, verse 12, where he’s introducing Jesus Christ as the Word of God, and what he has done for us: “he [Christ] gave to those who believe in his name power to become children of God...born of God.” The disciples *are* children of God.

Jesus – though they don’t yet know it’s him – tells them where to catch fish. “On the right side of the boat.” The disciples, hauling in the huge catch, instantly know that Jesus is with them. They race in to join Jesus in a meal he already has set on the beach: fish and bread, ancient symbols of the Lord’s Supper. And the meal is breakfast! the most important meal of the day.

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But it's more than a meal. In Jesus' culture, you were obligated to invite the stranger, the traveler, the wanderer, to share your food – even if you didn't have enough. While they were with you, they were under your protection. They became temporary family, just as in Genesis where Abraham invited God's messengers into his camp, and, later, Lot took care of them in the city, accepted no matter who they were.

The disciples were wandering, unfocused; now Jesus has made them family. Here, like a shepherd gathering his flock or like a hen gathering her brood, all images he's used before, Jesus invites the disciples together under the sacred banner of hospitality.

Here it is: the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God.

Jesus is feeding the disciples, not just food...and that the food reminds us – and them, I'm sure – of the miraculous feeding of the five thousand. It's pulling the pieces together. He's nurturing them – a process not just of pouring in raw nutrition, but of guiding, leading, teaching, mentoring – pulling them away from that sense of wandering without a plan or path, filling in the space at the center of their lives and their life as a group so that they can once again move outward. Like a coach after a bad loss; like Mom after some terrible disappointment.

Jesus doesn't feed them all by himself, either. He has them bring some of the fish they just caught: what he has, and what they have, two pieces coming together to make the whole meal – and so much more. A pot-luck! He's got their fellowship back in gear, reminded them who they are and whom they work for.

That's what the Church does for us, the children of God. The children of God – you and me – don't always remember, or lose sight of who they are. Sometimes those out there in the world don't even know in the first place. And you can't tell them by looking at them, either – any more than you can pick an angel out of a police line-up – but they may be there. The Church invites followers of Jesus in to be fed, to bring what they have, to be given a fresh sense of purpose, to be reminded of the works of God among them, and reminded who and whose they are – children of God, called together to remember that.

Jesus came to the disciples – and comes to us – where they were, where we are – physically, psychologically, and spiritually. He shelters and nurtures them, guides them, reminds them of their identity, pulls them back into a group of disciples. (LAST PART OF LESSON) Jesus sends them out to do what he has done for them for others: "Feed my sheep."

The Church goes looking for others who don't know they're God's children. We reach out to the hungry, physically and spiritually, those who are searching for shelter, for care, who don't yet realize that they're part of God's family, children just like the disciples, just like us.

And the Church can always do more, and we can do what we're doing better, even if you don't feel like you're a part of all of this. Each of you has a shelter-half, just like a Marine, ready to use. It only needs to be put together with someone else's to create a

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spiritual space, a place where the Holy Spirit can feed you both in Christian fellowship. You already have all the gear, everything you need to do your part. And it can be so simple.

Not too long ago, I visited a gentleman in his room in one of our care centers. Older than most all of you, he was on oxygen; sitting huddled in a chair, but with a sparkle in his eye. We talked for a while about people we both knew, how he felt, things like that; but then, when an aide came in, he asked if I'd mind if he stood up for a few minutes, and the aide helped him up.

When he stood up, the gleam in his eye became a bright, warm glow, and a smile spread across his face. He stood up as straight as he could, and said, "Ahhhhh!" He gazed around his spare little room with delight, and said, "Oh, most people don't know how wonderful it is to stand up!"

Right then, he and I knew that God was in that space, because God is always there when we're happy, when we're exuberantly grateful for the simple gifts.

And in that moment, we were both safe in God's shelter, nurtured by Christ. And we were certainly in spiritual fellowship. It was a moment filled with the Holy Spirit.

That gentle man shared his shelter-half with me, and I with him. We each brought ourselves to that space, and nurtured one another. That is the purpose of the Church, Christ's spiritual fellowship.