

“Starting at the Ends: A Community of Nurture”
 The Rev. Christine Chakoian
 Isaiah 58:6-11
 Mark 1:1; 2:1-12
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We are at the end of our four-week series, “Starting at the Ends.” As I said at the beginning, we have a remarkable opportunity now to examine who we are and what our church is about. It’s not because I personally am here, but because the season of the church’s life when it welcomes a new pastor is always a chance for discernment and growth. I am thrilled that the Long Range Planning Council chose to start its own work with discernment, and not to do its work on its own, but to invite us all into the questions of who we are and where we ought to go. A “given” is that “church” means not this place, but we, ourselves, the people of God in our daily lives, the “sent-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, the call 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, 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, to be a “Community of Nurture,” in which the children of God can find shelter and peace. Listen now for the word of God as it comes to us in the gospel of Mark.

“There is a hunger abroad in our time,” writes Marjorie Thompson in her lovely book, *Soul Feast*.

“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.” (*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 hyperbole, walk into any Barnes & Noble 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” (*A New and Right Spirit: Creating an authentic Church in a Consumer Culture* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2005) p. 84). Indeed, Barger

says, “Many come into a *worship* service not sure of what they want but know that they need ‘something.’”

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 our bodies broken by physical or mental illness. Maybe it’s a hunger for meaning, a longing for something more than fabulous culture and gorgeous vacations provide. Maybe it’s a hunger to feel adequate and affirmed, or forgiven for being a jerk, 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 and the tyranny of cell phones and e-mail, and 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? “There is no shortage of restaurants offering to fill our emptiness,” notes Joe Small of our denomination’s Office of Theology and Worship. “From the fast food of New Age crystals and pyramids to the five-star cuisine of ancient Asian religions, the menus are many and varied. Is the church just one more café on restaurant row?” (Joseph Small, *The Great Ends of the Church*, p. 12).

I began this series of sermons on the Great Ends of the Church by suggesting that “am I getting what I want out of church?” is the wrong question. That bothered a lot 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 as consumers in 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, “The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places.” The ancient church father, St. Augustine, said it this way: “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.” Our hearts are restless until they find their way home.

Learning to be children of God.

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,” I am reminded of a story Ann Lamott tells. When the pastor of her church was a little girl of seven, 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” (*Traveling Mercies*, “Overture: Lily Pads,” p. 55).

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 suburban pace. 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. As my southern friend Jim Lowry’s Pappy said to him every time Jim went out on a date, “Son, remember who you are.” Remember whose name you bear. Remember whose house you belong to. Remember who you really are.

Do you remember the Service of Renewal of our Baptismal Vows? At the beginning of the year, before we launched this series, we celebrated our true identity in the household of Jesus Christ: “Child of the covenant, you are sealed by the Holy Spirit, and 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.

In fact, the apostle Paul suggests that being a Christian is less like being born into a family, and more like an adoption. I’m reminded of our friends the Spencers, who adopted two little girls from China: Amy at 20 months old, and two

years later, Suzy at 3 ½ years old. (The girls are only 6 months apart, but they tell everyone they are *not* twins.) When Suzy was adopted, Amy wasted no time in showing her the ropes in her new family. Suzy didn't join her family with a full-formed understanding of what it meant to be a Spencer, but she learned. And she learned from her adopted sister. That's how it is for us in the household of God: we don't start with a full understanding of what it means to bear the name of Christ, but we learn. And we learn in large part from one another, from our sisters and brothers in Christ who welcome us in and show us the ropes.

For some of us, it's harder than for others, and our formation as children of God requires gentleness, forbearance, and endless patience. A few years ago I visited a psychiatric hospital one of our church members directed. Bruce wanted to show me around in part because it was his faith that prompted him to serve the mentally ill – not exactly a lucrative field for hospital administrators. As Bruce walked me through the various units – chemical dependency, chronic mental illness, self-inflicted injuries (largely teenage girls), eating disorders (ditto), he paused to greet each patient by name and ask how they were. What got me most was the long-term foster-care unit, where 30 children live for an average of two years. They are wards of the state, a drop in the bucket of the more than 2,000 children DCFS has in residential care. As Bruce walked me down the hall, he'd quietly say, "This child has the perfect imprint of an iron his back." Or "this girl was abused since she was a toddler." One young teenage girl we greeted was on the floor picking up shredded pieces of paper. She said she'd gotten mad and ripped up everything and now she had to clean it up. Bruce bent over and whispered something encouraging to her, and as we left he said to me, "These children have to learn from scratch what it means to be children, how to interact, how to treat each other with decency and respect, how to be loved – 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 are learning 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," Daddy. 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 blow it; 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 these 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.

The power of Christian community.

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

“Some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they lay down the mat on which the paralytic lay. When Jesus saw *their* faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven. ... Stand up, take your mat and go home.”

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. I think about so much of what we do in this church that is like that: Not just the things we do for those outside our number – the work we do with places like the Boys and Girls Clubs, or Allendale, where I visited this week, that also takes in high risk kids from the DCFS system; or the work we do literally rebuilding homes for victims of Katrina; or the shelter we provide for kids in grave difficulty through our work within these walls with Rainbows; and the thousand other things we do in the name of Jesus Christ for others. I also mean the things we do for one another, the tender mercies we provide in our own family of faith, in this affluent community that strives so hard to be strong and resilient and self-reliant, and not in need of anything, thank you. Yet we know better, don't we? Chances are you've been both giver and receiver in this dear household of God; there are so very many. Stephen Ministers who tend to the grieving, the sick, the lonely, the sad ... and those of us who are carried by them when we cannot stand on our own. The knitters of the Prayer Shawl ministry, and the ones whose shoulders are wrapped in their mantles of love. The Deacons who bring food and give rides during illnesses and bereavement, and the Prayer Chain who lift people up to the everlasting arms, and the men's and women's Bible studies who write notes of comfort and encouragement, and all of us who benefit from these kind and necessary ministrations. As for me, I will never forget the kindness shown me many years ago in Portland, when we lost our baby far into our pregnancy: the flowers and the notes and the simple gift of chicken soup and homemade bread ...

all this was love that carried me when I was utterly broken by sorrow ... and all of this carried me home.

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. And 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. My suspicion is that for all the busy-ness of this place, we're spending far more time in committee meetings and board meetings than in creating a beloved community, where we and everyone who walks into our doors can feel the "shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God." It's not that committees and boards don't matter – surely we accomplish important things through them. But often they are draining, and rare is the meeting that nourishes our souls. As I said at the very beginning of this series, the purpose of church membership is not to serve on a committee. And if, collectively, we're spending too much of ourselves in meetings, we simply must examine our way of doing things and trust fewer people to make more of the decisions. What if we spent more time together in small groups, studying Scripture, exploring our faith, so that we can help each other deeply learn God's message and engrave it on our hearts? Or what if we spent more time together, or as I suggested last week, supporting each other in our desire to be a moral player in the world of work or family or economics or civic leadership in which we live? Already I have received a number of e-mails and notes and voicemails from you expressing an interest in these conversations. The issue isn't whether we *care* about these things; the issue for many of us is simply *time*. We can't do much to change the pace of modern life, but the least we can do for each other here is to clear the field of committee work that isn't absolutely essential. It's a radical concept, but it's the only way I know to make the space we need for the truly urgent and important priorities we have: to become "Messengers of the Good News of the Gospel"; to become "Justice-Makers" in a broken world; and to create a "Community of Nurture" for the shelter and spiritual fellowship of the children of God. I can't think of anything that matters more.

And if we doubt that it matters, all we have to do is look around to the lives that God has touched, not in the abstract, but through the love of regular Christians, regular Christians like you and me. Let me close with this story from Ann Lamott, who in this passage tries to explain why she makes her young son, Sam, go to church ... and why, I imagine, in her heart of hearts, she hopes we all do:

“Sam is the only kid he knows who goes to church – who is made to go to church two or three times a month. He rarely wants to. This is not exactly true: the truth is he *never* wants to go. What young boy would rather be in church on the weekends than hanging out with a friend? ...

“You might think, noting the bitterness, the resignation, that he was being made to sit through a six-hour Latin mass. Or you might wonder why I make this strapping, exuberant boy come with me most weeks, and if you were to ask, this is what I would say.

“I make him because I can. I outweigh him by nearly seventy-five pounds.

“But that is only part of it. The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want – which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy – are people with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people in community, who practice their faith. ... They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful. ... Our funky little church is filled with people who are working for peace and freedom, who are out there on the streets and inside praying, and they are home writing letters, and they are at the shelters with giant platters of food.

“When I was at the end of my rope, the people at St. Andrew tied a knot in it for me and helped me hold on. The church became my home in the old meaning of *home* – that is where, when you show up, they have to let you in. They let me in. They even said, ‘You come back now’ (*Traveling Mercies*, “Why I Make Sam Go to Church” (NY: Pantheon, 1999), pp. 99-100).

“[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” (p. 55).

“O Lord, our hearts are restless till they find their rest in thee,” Augustine said. O Lord, our hearts are restless ... until they find their way home. Amen.