

## **Manuscript of the June 22, 2008 Sermon – Jeffrey E. Bryan**

### **The Great Ends of the Church Series**

#### **2. The shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God**

This summer, our sermon topics will be the guided by the historic great ends of the church. Like I said last week, the term “great ends” is just old-timey language for “what being the church is all about.” This is who we are. This is what we do. The great ends of the church are listed in your bulletin. Today we are talking about #2, so if you look there you’ll see we’re talking about the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God.

One more thing, after we read scripture, I’d like to participate in a very old tradition. At the end of the reading, I’ll say, “The Word of the Lord,” and you repeat back, “Thanks be to God.” I haven’t done that in a while, and I miss it. Is that okay? It’s easy – The Word of the Lord, Thanks be to God.

Hear the word of the Lord as it comes to us from James, chapter 5, verses 7-11 and 13-20.

<sup>7</sup>Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. <sup>8</sup>You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. <sup>9</sup>Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

<sup>10</sup>Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. <sup>11</sup>As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

<sup>13</sup>Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. <sup>14</sup>Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. <sup>15</sup>And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. <sup>16</sup>Therefore

confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

<sup>17</sup>Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. <sup>18</sup>Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops. <sup>19</sup>My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, <sup>20</sup>remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

Brothers and sisters, this is the Word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

We are thankful for the Word of God. It is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. We are also very thankful for the Word of God made flesh, Jesus Christ. When it comes to the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God – I think it all boils down, conveniently, to 2 points: spiritual discipline, and fish farms.

Point #1: spiritual disciplines. God is real; and God is good. God loves you. God loves us all so much that in Jesus, God lived, died, and lives again for us and our salvation. We are a people doing our best to follow this loving, caring, life-saving Jesus. It only makes sense that we spend as much time with him as possible, worshipping, praising, and having conversations with God the father, building a life-long, intimate relationship with the Holy Spirit. Much the same way Olympic athletes love their sport, discipline their bodies, go to the gym, exercise their muscles and get strong – we as Christians love an awesome God, and we too have daily, intentional, spiritual exercises. We are always working on a deeper, fuller, stronger faith, and a more profound experience of God. This is who we are. This is what we do. And, this is nothing new.

We have inherited a long tradition of spiritual disciplines. The scripture we used for today's Call to Worship is a famous passage from the Old Testament. It's called the "shema," which is just the Hebrew word for "listen." For centuries, religiously observant Jews have used these little things called "mezuzahs." You may have seen them. It's a tiny piece of paper with the shema scripture written on it. Jewish folks put that scripture in cool, little decorative boxes and hang them on doorframes

around the house. Every time you walk through a door, you touch the mezuzah, listen briefly, and remember the Lord. I love the simplicity of this ancient spiritual discipline: just stop, listen, and remember the Lord. I once heard a Methodist preacher encourage his congregation to “mezuzah” their entire life. For example, every time you touch a doorknob, pick up the remote control, put on your shoes, send an email, whatever – pick something and every time you do that one thing, stop, listen, and remember the Lord.

In the New Testament, there are a number of stories where Jesus slips off by himself to pray. Some might call that the spiritual discipline of quiet time, a prayer walk, or meditation. Another rich, old tradition from the Bible is praying the psalms. The book of Psalms has often been called the prayer book of the Bible, and we know those musical prayers are important because Jesus himself quotes them so often. Jesus prayed Psalm 22 from the cross. I’d say that’s a pretty good endorsement for praying the psalms. Furthermore, in the letter James wrote for all the churches, the one we read earlier, he gives enough examples of spiritual disciplines to last a lifetime: prayer, patience, music, confessing to one another, holding one another accountable in small groups, commitment to the community of faith.

Spiritual disciplines are more than just good advice, this is the Christian life: shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship. Many folks in this congregation are experts on this stuff, so let me encourage you all to collaborate and share ideas. I’ve even got some great devotional websites I could suggest. God is so big and so good we are always in need of experiencing him in fresh ways. Speaking from rich, personal experience: without some kind of spiritual workout regimen, people of faith shrivel up and die inside. I’ve been there; and I think we all could use encouragement when it comes to spiritual discipline.

That brings us to point #2: fish farms. Throughout the scriptures, you can sense the urgency and importance of passing down the faith to our children. Even in that passage from Deuteronomy – the shema – we hear it: “impress them [the commandments] on your children.” Jesus himself welcomed the little children, and he warned the adults not to get in the way, too. When it comes to the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God we must talk about a difficult reality, and it has to do with children and young families.

There once was a time in this country when the local church was full on Sunday morning. Church was not an option. You just went. Everybody went to Sunday School. Families sat together in worship. Children squirmed during the sermon, but for the most part they got over it. The grown-ups got over it too: so what, the kid squirms a little in church and makes a little noise, big deal. Ya can't get grumpy about that: it's good for the children to be in church. I mean, how else are they going to learn how to sit through these sermons? Right? Families used to come home after church, sit down and have lunch together, and talk. Many of us fondly remember those good old days; many of us are doing our best, against all odds, to keep that wholesome goodness alive; and I think many of us are just discouraged and asking questions. Questions like:

What happened to America? Why are there so many churches in our presbytery on life support or just closing down? Where did we go wrong? Why don't families and youngsters come to church like they used to? Or worse: many of us ask these kinds of questions: Where did I fail my children, my grandchildren, and my community?

Over the last few weeks, we have been repeating a point, and I'll admit, belaboring a point. That is: go. If we want to grow as a church, we have to go and get people. Jesus calls us to be fishers for people; but in a lot of ways the Presbyterian denomination in our country has lived on the expectation that we are a fish farm. The hard fact is: the good old days are gone. Long gone. Fact: Back in the day we could expect our children to return to church when they had kids of their own, but now when that happens, it's the rare exception that proves the rule. The Christian church in North America is hemorrhaging young people; and at the same time, I have a pastor friend who does two funerals a week. Fact: our denomination loses about 40K people a year. We pastors hear rumors that the last Presbyterian in America will lock the door and turn off the light in the year 2030. These hard realities have forced us to reframe some questions.

The question is no longer, "What went wrong?" The question is now, "What is God calling me to do?" How can I be actively, passionately faithful today? What is God's great mission for my life today? I completely understand why someone might ask, "Where did I fail my children and grandchildren?" But that's a shaming, paralyzing, distracting question. God still has promises to keep in our lives. The question is now: "What can I

pray for? Who can I pray for? Who needs to know that I love them, and God loves them too?" The question is not, "Why are the people not in church any more?" The question is, "Where are they now, so we can go show them the love of Christ?"

It is radically, critically, biblically, Christian-ly important for us to shelter and nurture our children in the faith. Hear me clearly, church, because I'm about to brag on you. I think this congregation is doing a fantastic job nurturing our children. You are excellent fish farmers. I thought children's Sunday two weeks ago was awesome. It was hot and I got gamey under the arms, but I was and I am so proud. I can't wait for VBS. This congregation understands that children are not the future of the church. Children are the church right now. Their faith, calling, and mission to the world is just as valid and important as anybody else's. Furthermore, this church has the very best grown-ups in the world. Young families and children need to get in contact with the grown-ups in this church. I take that back – young families and children need to get in touch with the Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, in the hearts of the grown-ups in this church.

First Presbyterian: Keep up the good work sheltering, nurturing, and spiritually fellowship-ing with the children of God. Keep up the good work fish farming. Let me encourage you to keep up the good work, going out and inviting people. We've got this good news, and it is so good we just have to share it. This is who we are. This is what we do.

You know, I read stories of riots, racism, homelessness, gun violence, unruly children, drugs abuse – in the 1940s and 50s! – and I wonder if the good old days ever existed at all. I have a sneaking suspicion that these are the good old days. I have a sneaking suspicion God keeps his promises. Tomorrow, by the grace of God, by the faith and prayers of you loving Christians, by the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God, tomorrow is the good old days.