

Shelter, Nurture, Fellowship

Isaiah 43:1-3

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By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

Happy St. Patrick's Day! In the tradition of Irish storytelling, I have a few for you this morning:

Father O'Malley receives a phone call. "Hello, is this Father O'Malley?"

"It is."

"This is the Internal Revenue Service, income tax department. Can you help us?"

"I can."

"Do you know a Ted Houlihan?"

"I do."

"Is he a member of your congregation?"

"He is."

"Did he donate \$10,000 to the church?"

"He will."

Father O'Reilly was a parish priest. Every week at mass during the homily he was inclined to expound upon his political beliefs about the English. His parish was rather sophisticated and quickly grew tired of hearing the priest complain about the Brits. It was so regular and so explicit that members of his parish began to complain to the Bishop. The Bishop confronted Father O'Reilly explaining that if he continued to denigrate the English in his homilies, the Bishop would be forced to remove him from the parish. "I'm sorry Bishop, it won't happen again!"

exclaimed Father O'Reilly. But then he did it again, so the Bishop removed him for a time since the warning didn't appear to work. As Holy Week approached, the Bishop began to feel sorry for Father O'Reilly. 'What is a priest if he can't lead his parish during Holy week after all?' So the Bishop allowed Father O'Reilly to lead worship after obtaining his promise not to denigrate the English again.

On Maundy Thursday at worship, Father O'Reilly began to recount the story of Jesus and his disciples in the upper room. He said, "And then Jesus turned to his disciples and said, 'One of you is going to betray me!' John, the disciple, whom Jesus loved, turned to him and asked, "Is it I Lord?"

"No John, it isn't you!" Then Peter, the one Jesus called the rock, turned and asked, "Is it I Lord?"

"No, it isn't you, Peter." Then Judas turned and asked, "I say, Ol' Chap, it wouldn't be me would it?"

Murphy applied for a fermentation operator post at a famous Irish firm based in Dublin. An American applied for the same job and since both applicants had similar qualifications, they were asked to take a test by the manager. When the results were in, amazingly, both men had only one wrong answer. The manager went to Murphy and said, "Thank you for coming to the interview, but we've decided to give the American the job." Murphy exclaimed, "And why would you be doing that? We both got 19 questions correct. This being Ireland and me being Irish surely I should get the job." The Manager said, "We have not made our decision on the correct answers, but on the question you missed."

"And just how would one incorrect answer be better than the other?" The manager answered, "Simple. On question number 7 the American wrote down, 'I don't know.' You put down, 'Neither do I.'"

Last week we began a sermon series on the Six Great Ends of the Church, beginning with the “Proclamation of the Gospel for the salvation of humankind.” Today we take up that series with the second Great End: “The shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God.” There is a mission for the church in the world but there is also an incubator, a place where the children of God gather and learn and grow together. There is a place of safety where the faithful are baptized and children are nurtured - a place where transformative relationships begin to lead to deeper faith, and working together to redress wrongs and care for those in need. What is the church? Is it these buildings? Is it something inside of you? Or is it something between us and among us?

A little humor this morning is helpful as the week has been filled with news of cheating scandals for admission to elite universities with over \$25 million dollars exchanging hands, involving coaches, and proctors of exams, and a Harvard graduate who is so smart he can get any score on the SAT he wants. There was the crash of a Boeing jet in Ethiopia with the loss of 157 lives, and the shooting at two mosques in a place called Christchurch, New Zealand, which was captured on a headcam and shared through social media – designed (it appears) to start a holy war or at least a racial war. Racist white supremacy ideology spewed in a 74-page manifesto has resulted in 49 deaths and more than 40 injuries – in Christchurch! Christ . . . Church! Those who established and named the city certainly could never have imagined that one day the world would know their town as place of carnage due to an Australian racist who deliberately attacked a symbol of peace and tranquility. This week’s news has cultivated a desire to find a place of shelter and nurture and spiritual fellowship.

This congregation was established in 1941 just months before Pearl Harbor and the entrance of the United States into World War II— also a time of division and worldwide conflict. The Presbytery of Los Angeles waited years before they could begin to build here, because resources were scarce as the economy became centered on the war effort.

Early in the development of the San Marino Community Church, the decision was made to buy this three-acre site of land from the school district in order to build a place of worship with a sanctuary and church buildings for education and ministries to the community. Neighbors, seeking to prevent the sale, sued to stop the sale of the land to the young church. At first there was a petition for a temporary injunction to restrain the district from selling the land but that

effort was denied by the judge. Neighbors sued again on other grounds and the case was allowed to proceed. It culminated in a two-day trial which concluded with Superior Judge Ingall W. Bull affirming the right of the school district to sell its surplus land to the church and ordering escrow to proceed. According to Betty Carriel's history, all three attorneys representing the school district were church members. Some in the developing congregation wondered about the additional expense. The cost for attorney's fees led to comments heard around church that 'typical fees for two days in court by that legal bunch would pay for another wing of the church.'

What is the church? Is it these buildings or is it an idea? Does it exist when there is brick and mortar or does it exist when people gather, wherever they gather, to worship Jesus Christ and to teach the faith and serve others? The Presbyterian Church affirms the role of community in living our lives in faith in the Declaration of Faith in this way:

God made us for life in community. God created human beings with a need for community and with freedom to enter into it by responding to their Maker with grateful obedience and to one another with love and helpfulness. We believe that we have been created to relate to God and each other in freedom and responsibility. We may misuse our freedom and deny our responsibility by trying to live without God and other people or against God and other people. Yet we are still bound to them for our life and well-being, and intended for free and responsible fellowship with them. Since every human being is made for communion with God and others, we must treat no one with contempt. We are to respect and love all other people and ourselves as well.

The Church provides the sheltering love of God as a canopy of faith that surrounds and supports the children of God who come together in community. We are the church, not only when we gather here, but especially when we disperse and go to our homes, and places of work, and the little league field, and school, and neighborhoods. "The kingdom of God is within you," says the Lord!

Ten years ago we were planning a capital campaign to renovate the church that had developed a significant amount of deferred maintenance. For example, the roof had never been replaced and after 70 years or so, it was time. However not everyone agreed to the plan. Some felt the church is strictly for the purpose of mission and should focus exclusively on seeking justice and reaching out to the poor and oppressed. Investing in renovations seemed counter to Scripture's

mandate to feed the hungry and visit those in prison and clothe the naked. At least one family left the church over the decision to renovate the facilities. They felt mission was more important than “. . .the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God.” Even though over \$600,000 of that campaign was given to ministry partners locally and around the world, they felt it was wrongly focusing on our needs as a congregation rather than the needs of others.

The Six Great Ends of the Church balance the needs of all and the ministries of the Church. We baptized a child this morning who also needs to learn and grow in faith. The family that worships together and prays together tends to stay together. The ministries of San Marino Community Church include reaching out and reaching in. The ministries are for us but not only for us.

Thus says the Lord, “The one who created you and formed you – Do not fear, for I have redeemed you and called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you: when you walk through fire, you will not be burned and the flame will not consume you, for I am the Lord your God, your Savior.”

And so your church here is a place of welcome and shelter and nurture and fellowship for the children of God. So go out there and enjoy the fellowship with one another because we were made for life in community, to relate to God and each other. We may misuse our freedom and deny our responsibility by trying to live without God and other people, or against God and other people. Yet we are still bound to them for our life and well-being, and intended for free and responsible fellowship with them. Since every human being is made for communion with God and others, we must treat no one with contempt. We are to respect and love all other people and ourselves as well. Thanks be to God!