



# Poland Presbyterian Church

*At the Green since 1802*

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**A Sermon by Brent J. Eelman**

## ***Give Me Shelter***

### **Acts 2:37-47**

*Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, 'Brothers, what should we do?'<sup>38</sup> Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.<sup>39</sup> For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.'<sup>40</sup> And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.'<sup>41</sup> So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added.<sup>42</sup> They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*

*<sup>43</sup> Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.<sup>44</sup> All who believed were together and had all things in common; <sup>45</sup> they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup> Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home\* and ate their food with glad and generous\* hearts, <sup>47</sup> praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.*

This is the second sermon in a series on the "Great Ends of the Church." (I had all 6 of the Great Ends of the Church included in the bulletin.) This month, Poland Presbyterian Church will begin a Mission Study. It will be led by a committee chosen by the session, but it will involve the entire congregation. It will provide the foundation for the search for your new pastor. My reason for this series is to examine the purpose of the church. At times we get so busy with "things" and activities, that we lose sight of why we exist. Last week, I spoke about the first great end of the church: **the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind**. Today I want to discuss the second great end: **the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the people of God**. The theme behind this purpose is that there is no such thing as a solitary Christian. Christian faith is experienced and lived in community with others.

The great 16<sup>th</sup> century British poet and preacher, John Donne, in a sermon about mortality, preached:

*"All mankind is of one author, and is one volume... No man is an island, entire of itself"*

Human beings are not created to live in isolation, but with others in community. In our western culture we have personalized and privatized just about everything, but genuine Christian faith cannot be experienced alone. It is experienced in sharing, trust, mutual support and growth. Today I want to explore the three parts of this community: 1. **shelter**, 2. **nurture** and 3. **spiritual fellowship**, and then conclude with a story.

## I

**Shelter:** When we speak of shelter, we usually refer to having a roof over our head. Shelter is what protects us from the elements. Shelter is where we feel safe. During WW II, there were a number of public shelters throughout England, where people went during air-raids. The shelters protected them from the hail of bombs. We seek shelter as protection, be it from the elements or from other dangers. The church also provides shelter.

In many of our cities the church is a literal provider of shelter. Congregations offer their buildings for homeless people, protecting them from the cold and criminal elements that might prey on them. But shelter is much broader than merely a roof over our heads. The church needs to be a safe place!

I often think about this in terms of our youth. It is not easy growing up in this world. There are bullies of all types. One of the most important aspects of youth ministry is to provide a place of safety for our youth: a shelter where they are safe from bullying, teasing, threats and harm. The church needs to be a place where they can safely develop and mature with others. But it is not just for children and youth. All of us need a place of safety and refuge, where no matter our circumstance, our history and story, we are accepted. We need a place where we can express our hopes, our fears, our worries, our doubts, and our joys and know that we will be loved, comforted, assured, and cared for. We need a place where we experience grace in relationships and ultimately the grace of God for our souls.

## II

**Nurture:** Psalm 84 beautifully shares this image of shelter. It is a song of a pilgrim traveling to the Temple in Jerusalem. He sees the Temple and breaks out in song. Part of that song declares, even the sparrow is able to make a home and safely raise her young there.

*Safely raise our young.* Without food and water, we perish. All of us need nutrition. Jesus, responding to the tempter, stated that we not only need to feed our bodies, but our spirit also hungers and can starve. The church is a community of faith that nurtures the young and old in its midst. This, too, is a community activity. I spend a great deal of time in personal study, but I have discovered that when I am teaching, or spending time facilitating study with members of the congregation, that is when I truly grow and mature in my faith. Once again, no-one is an island... Christian education and nurture is not a solitary activity!

This summer, we heard the statements of faith from the confirmation class. What touched me about their statements was the role that PPC played in nurturing them, and giving them room to grow in faith, but more, providing a community of faith for them.

### III

**Spiritual fellowship.** The early church had a word, *koinonia*. It is a difficult word to translate because of the subtlety of its meaning. It referred to the fellowship of early Christians. The Second chapter of the book of Acts describes this early Christian fellowship: "They devoted themselves to the apostle's teachings and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers.... All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need...."

One of the banes of the contemporary church is our emphasis on size and numbers. We often believe that good churches are large churches. Often what is lost, is the intimacy, the sharing, and the fellowship that the human spirit needs. All of us need to connect with other people. All of us need friends and people who love and care about us. This intimacy requires smaller groups, and this is behind small group ministry. Our world is large and impersonal. Our neighborhoods are not what they used to be. The connections that people need with each other is absolutely vital to our spiritual well-being.

This is one of the strengths of PPC. I have witnessed how you pull together as a congregation during the difficult times of illness and death, but also during the joyous times of celebration, and fun. This is a congregation that values its connections with each other. The challenge is extending this connection to the new resident, the stranger who wanders into our midst, looking for all the things that we cherish and enjoy here. We need to be able to share our shelter, nurture and fellowship with the stranger who is seeking this. Most of us have friends here and we have our groups that give us the support and nurture that we need. The challenge is to be open and welcoming to the stranger: to offer the fellowship of Jesus Christ with those whom we do not know.

Let me conclude with a story about a stranger. The story is true and ultimately it speaks to this great end of the church, the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the people of God.

It occurred while I was a Pastor in Houston, Texas. One Sunday, following the first service, I was approached by a man in his thirties, who appeared to be Middle-Eastern. He could barely speak English, but he asked if I would baptize him. I responded that I needed some

assurance that he understood the meaning of baptism and was willing to make the commitments required at the time of baptism.

I met with him a few times and through a translator was able to learn that he was from Iran, and was living in downtown Houston. He affirmed the commitments of baptism and so a few weeks later, in worship, I baptized him. He became a regular worshiper and continued to participate and that is where the story should probably end... but it didn't.

A year later, about three months before I left Houston, I received a call from one of the members of an adult bible study in the congregation. This class met weekly on a Thursday evening and apparently this individual was meeting with them. "We need your help."

The caller continued to explain that the individual I baptized was about to be deported to Iran. Apparently he was in the country illegally, and was appealing for asylum on the basis that he was a Christian, converted from Islam, and if he was deported back to Iran, he would be executed as an infidel. "Would you be willing to testify at his hearing at the immigration court?" I agreed. I went with the bible class, about fifteen of them, in the church mini-bus to the hearing.

In the course of the hearing this is what I discovered. The government wanted to deport him because they believed that he was faking his Christian faith. I remember the prosecutor for the government stating that his baptism was a "baptism of convenience" for the purpose of getting him asylum in our country. He really wasn't Christian. I along with members of the bible class testified on his behalf, but inside of me, I began to wonder and doubt if this really wasn't "a baptism of convenience." Was I duped?

At the hearing I also discovered that he regularly attended the bible study and that after about six months took a leadership role in it. Now the irony: A federal judge would have to decide if this individual was truly a Christian. In order to do so, the judge would have to determine what a Christian was.

I remember his verdict as though it was yesterday. First, the judge stated that he believed that it was a "baptism of convenience." This individual got himself baptized as part of a greater strategy to stay in this country. I felt the sting of those words. But the judge went on to say: "something happened after that." He believed that at some point, for lack of a better expression, **"the baptism took."** He stated that although the individual was not motivated by faith when he was baptized, that as he stood before the court that day, he was a Christian... why? Because of the presence of the fifteen women and men from his bible

study; because of the presence of the fellowship of Christians. The proof of Christian faith was the presence of the Christian community.

The story, illustrates this great end of the church... the young man sought and found the shelter of the church... he was nurtured by the scriptures through study... and the presence of the spiritual fellowship of the church ultimately was his salvation.

I remember that moment in the courthouse. I felt like Moses standing on holy ground. Something special occurred that day. I had witnessed a congregation boldly express the "shelter, nurture, and fellowship of the people of God."