



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

SCRIPTURE:
2 Timothy 1:3-7

September 12, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Our spiritual grandparents, as we identified them last Sunday, have given us some language about the church. This language is called the “great ends of the church” or great purposes. They speak to an important question: What is the church for? It’s old language and we don’t really talk like that anymore, but there is still wisdom here. The first great end of the church is the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind. We talked about that last Sunday and affirmed that we belong to God. That’s not something we make happen; it’s simply something we trust.

Our spiritual grandparents have told us that the second great purpose of the church is the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God. If the first purpose (or great end) declares that we belong to God, the second affirms that we belong to one another. We talk about that a lot at Village. Some speak of Christian faith as if it is about inner life. Faith is about peace of mind, about joy in the dark of night, about hope. And it is all of those things. But even a casual glance at the ministry of Jesus shows that faith is about creating these inner conditions for the purpose of shaping our interactions with others. Christian faith is about our relationships—how we are with others—*all* others. The church exists to foster spiritual friendship.

There are two things I want to say about this. The first is that the church exists to assure you that you are not alone.

Paul writes to Timothy. I bring this text back to us with some regularity because it’s one I want us to rehearse. I want us to have this passage in our memory. I think Paul is being a wonderful pastor here. Timothy is having some kind of crisis of faith. I was talking with my friend Jessica Tate this week

and she said that to live in this world as a disciple of Christ means we are always swimming against the cultural currents. The teachings of Jesus are a bit out of step with so many of the cultural assumptions, that to be faithful means we are always swimming upstream. And it’s just hard to swim upstream all the time. Whatever Timothy’s struggles were, it doesn’t take much imagination to relate. Because faith is hard.

So, Paul writes to Timothy and he reminds him that he is not alone. “Remember your mother and your grandmother,” he says. They were strong women of faith. They were the ones who loved you into the faith. Lean on them. But not only lean on them, Timothy, you’ve got me. I’m in your corner. Paul reminds Timothy that in the midst of his struggle, he is not alone. He is part of the children of God. Paul is practicing the spiritual friendship that this great end exhorts. When the church is the church, we remind each other that we are not alone.

In 1988, I traveled to Chile with a group of Presbyterians to witness the mission work of our denomination in Latin America. It was inspiring to see the work of our church in places of great need. Some travel the world and see the situations that most people live in and it creates a sense of gratitude for the lives that we lead here. Others, like the folks in my group, see the situation that folks live in and it creates a sense of responsibility. It was humbling.

One morning, we were all going to a church to see their soup kitchen. We took taxis. We couldn’t all fit in the same taxi, so I ended up in a taxi with Mark. Neither Mark nor I spoke Spanish... there was barely an “Hola” between us. Our group leader gave the taxi driver the address and off we went. But there was some confusion. Because when our taxi driver let us off, we were not at the church. We were

somewhere in downtown Santiago, but we had no idea where.

We tried to ask people on the street how to get to the church, but communication failed. There were crowds of people walking by, all talking at the speed of light, not a word to be understood. I began to wonder how I would find my way back home. I felt anxious but even more than anxious, I felt alone. Then, all of a sudden, I heard, “Y’all need directions?” “Y’all?” The voice of angels. It was a guy born in Santiago but he went to school at the University of Tennessee, where he clearly learned the essentials. I didn’t feel so alone anymore.

We live in a lonely culture. There are studies about what loneliness does to our physical and mental health. It is a problem in our culture. But one of the things you do really well is take care of one another. We are remembering today with gratitude the ministry of three women in our church family. Ruthie Kline, Jane Abildgaard, and Sue Meredith have given an untold number of hours to a ministry called Telecare. They shepherd a team of volunteers, including your pastors, to reach out to members of the Village family who cannot get to us. They coordinate phone calls to folks to make sure they know they are the children of God and that they are not alone. That work has always been important, but never as important as it has been in the past year and a half. I think the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God means the church reminds again and again: you are not alone.

There is a second point about this statement that I want to make sure we don’t miss. Spiritual fellowship is not just connection for the sake of connection, as valid as that is. Our relationships serve a purpose. Joe Small worked in the denominational office of Theology and Worship for 20 years, and Joe says the purpose of the church is to nourish spiritual maturity. This makes a lot of sense to me.

If we were to keep reading this letter from Paul, we would discover that before it ends, Paul tells Timothy, I know you are in a crisis now, but I need you. I’m writing from jail and I need you to be my spiritual friend. So, I need the best in you; it’s an exhortation for spiritual maturity. But what does

spiritual maturity look like?

It’s worth considering because it seems to me that COVID has squeezed the maturity out of just about everyone. Seldom are we at our best selves. So let me give you this image: I think a simple way to think of spiritual maturity is when we live like we are not alone—like we are not the center of everything.

It’s not as easy as it sounds because we experience every moment, every encounter, every circumstance with ourselves at the center of it. It’s easy to assume that experience is the truth. But spiritual maturity is recognizing we are not the center. We need to be decentered a bit and recognize we are not alone—but rather we belong to one another.

This week, the nation has been reliving the pain of 20 years ago. I was in a staff meeting when Jennie, a member of the staff, interrupted us. “You need to pray,” she said. “A plane just flew into the World Trade Center.” If you are old enough, you remember where you were that day. One of the things we have been remembering is not only the pain of that day, but the heroism.

There were ordinary men and women, mostly from the New York Fire Department and the New York City Police, who ran not away from the trouble but into it, to make sure that those inside knew they were not alone. They lived, at least in those moments, like we are in this together. All week we have been reading and hearing stories of those heroes.

And I am grateful that we remember them, for they should not be forgotten. But we should do more than remember them. We should recognize that we need heroes every day and it can be us. Every day there are people who need to be reminded that they are not alone. And every day there are crises where we need to live like we belong to one another.

There is a public-health crisis that is killing people every day—more than 200 times the number who died on 9/11. And many have acted like what is at stake is my right to live any way I want, even if that puts my neighbor at risk. We can be more mature than that.

From the west to the east coast, from the Gulf to New England, there are people whose homes have been destroyed by fire and wind and rain, and they

need to know that they are not alone. We need to live like we belong to one another. The purpose of the church is to nourish spiritual maturity and spiritual maturity shows up when we decenter ourselves a bit and ask, “How do we love our neighbors?”

I’m not pointing fingers because spiritual maturity is a journey that never ends. I got a lesson in this from a surprising person.

The church I served in Jacksonville was across the street from a public park. Some of the homeless community in Jax lived there. Often, on my way into the church, someone would ask for spare change or a cup of coffee.

One morning, I walked down the street to a coffee shop when one of the guys from the park spotted me. He said, “Sir, can I come in with you?” I knew what he wanted. “Sure,” I said. “Come on.”

I ordered my coffee and said, “I’ll also pay for whatever he’s having.” He said, “I just want a cup of water.” But then he put money on the counter. “What’s that?” I asked. “I’d like to buy your coffee, if you don’t mind,” he said.

“I don’t understand, why are you buying my coffee?” He said, “You’re the pastor of that church, right?” “Yes.” “You have a really nice choir.” “Yes, we do.” He said, “I used to sing in the choir when I was in college.”

“You were in college?” He said, “Yes, until my mom got sick, and I had to drop out. But I love the music, and Michael, your custodian, he lets me in balcony when the choir is rehearsing on Thursday nights. I lie in a pew and listen. Reverend, it’s the best part of my week. For an hour, I am surrounded by beauty. So, I just want to buy you a cup of coffee and ask you to thank the singers at your church.”

“I’m sorry, what’s your name?” “I’m Gabriel,” he said. “Your name is Gabriel?” “Yes, sir. It’s a name from the Bible.” “Yeah, I know that. Gabriel, would you like to come and sing with them on Thursday?” “Oh, no,” he said. “I don’t sing anymore but tell them I love to listen. Tell them the anthem by Rutter they practiced last week is one of my favorites. Enjoy your coffee.” And he walked away.

I walked into that coffee shop feeling pretty good. I was prepared to do a good deed, to let my Christian generosity show. But what I am ashamed to admit is that I didn’t for a second walk into that coffee shop thinking that Gabriel and I belonged to one another in any fashion at all. I did not walk in there seeing the both of us as being in this life together... that is, until he made it impossible to ignore.

But there is hope. Perhaps I will grow up someday and then I will see everyone I meet as a member of the family of God.