

Isaiah 61: 1-4
Romans 10: 9-17
March 13, 2011
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
The Great Ends of the Church Week One:
The Proclamation of the Gospel for the Salvation of Humankind

This week we begin a reflection on six affirmations developed by the Presbyterian Church of North America from 1904-1910 called the Great Ends of the Church. In 1958 these affirmations were adopted by the United Presbyterian Church of the U.S.A and included in the Book of Order. When the UPCUSA united with the Presbyterian Church of the U.S. in 1983 the importance of these six statements was again confirmed.

The Great Ends of the Church are:

- the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind;
- the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God;
- the maintenance of divine worship
- the preservation of the truth
- the promotion of social righteousness
- the exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world.

As Joseph Small says in his introduction to the study guide we will be using, The Great Ends are a kind of mission statement for our denomination: a statement of the core purposes that inspire and focus our ministry. I am embarrassed that in nearly three decades of ordained ministry have I been invited or invited others to study these fundamental statements of what it means to be a church of Jesus Christ. It was only last year at the end of the class on John Calvin that Terry Nieman suggested we take a look at the Great Ends of the Church for the next year's Lenten study that a light went on and I said, "What a great idea!" So, here we are!

It is no accident that the very first of the Great Ends is: the Proclamation of the Gospel for the Salvation of Humankind. Who would argue with that? After all, it's right there in the Great Commission given by Jesus to the disciples after he rose from the dead:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.
Go, therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them
In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.
(Matthew 28: 16-20)

Again, Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah in what some have called his inaugural sermon:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim
release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to
let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor
(Luke 4: 18-19)

These statements are significant as much as for what they do not say as for what they do say.

In each passage Jesus indicates that proclaiming the Gospel is about a lot more than giving sermons. It is about making disciples, baptizing, and teaching. It is about bringing good news to the poor, announcing release to the captives, bringing sight to the blind, freeing the oppressed and proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor.

What do we learn from this? I suggest that if nothing else proclaiming the gospel is a hands-on activity. It demands involvement with the world and carrying out the ministries pursued by Jesus while he lived among us. Proclaiming good news comes from a commitment to follow with our whole lives the way of Jesus. Proclaiming the Gospel is a way of doing and it is a way of being.

Now, notice what Jesus does not say. He does not talk about *salvation*. In fact, I can find only one instance in the Gospels where Jesus is quoted using the word. That instance is in Luke 19 when the despised tax collector Zaccheus promises to return his ill gotten wealth to those from whom he has extorted it and to make amends to all he has made suffer. At this moment Jesus proclaims, “Today *salvation* has come to this house.

Now the interesting thing about the Greek word used by Luke to render the Aramaic word Jesus used is that it indicates a restoration of relationship. In this case, Zaccheus’ repentance leads to a restoration of his relationship with his community and most importantly to God. He is restored to the relationship intended by God for humanity.

I am guessing that for most of you the word salvation is connected with passionate mission to save people from the fires of hell. I’d be a rich man if I could have a dollar for every time I have been asked, “Are you saved?” What does that mean? Does it mean I have confessed Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior and am therefore confident of going to heaven? Does this mean that the proclaiming of the gospel for the salvation of humankind is an attempt to rescue people from hell? Is proclaiming the gospel threatening people with grisly images of perdition in order to motivate them to flee John Bunyan’s City of Destruction to the Heavenly City?

It may surprise you that sometimes the answer is, “Yes! Absolutely!”

When I was on intern year during seminary I coordinated worship for the jails in Cincinnati. It was my approach to proclaim the gospel to the women and men in the jails in terms of how much God loved them. The people were very polite but were clearly unmoved by my message. Then came the day when the Pentecostals came. The message was clear: “You are going to hell unless you turn around and give your life to Jesus

Christ. The liberal in me cringed. Yet I was astonished by the reaction of the prisoners gathered outside of their cells. They were smiling! They were asking questions. They were asking for more. When the service was over they asked when this group was coming back.

Message to Stewart: Proclaiming the Gospel for the salvation of humankind may take many forms. But there are two dimensions which are essential. The first is that it must address the reality that most people suffer. In seeking to avoid being judgmental, my bland message did not touch the reality of these women and men. *They were in prison for goodness sake! They were in hell!* Any message that did not take that critical fact into account and did not address the reality of their lives was a waste of breath. In the case of the prisoners it was good news that someone addressed them where they were. It gave them the experience of being understood.

The second dimension builds on the first. It is the proclamation that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. The Greek word *sozo* carries a similar sense as *soteria* which is to restore to spiritual soundness—in order to restore to full relationship humans to God and to one another.

And so now I want to proclaim Good News to you! In Jesus Christ God has restored you to relationship. Like the father of the prodigal son he is looking for you and expecting you to turn up any day now. Will you come? Will you recognize that God yearns for you to come home and be restored to the full relationship of a child of God, a full sister and brother of God's son, Jesus? Will you receive the grace and acceptance he has already given you? Please do not stand at a distance! .

Will you come? Amen.