

Deuteronomy 26:1-11 ^{ESV} 1 "When you come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance and have taken possession of it and live in it, 2 you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from your land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket, and you shall go to the place that the LORD your God will choose, to make his name to dwell there. 3 And you shall go to the priest who is in office at that time and say to him, 'I declare today to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our fathers to give us.' 4 Then the priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down before the altar of the LORD your God. 5 "And you shall make response before the LORD your God, 'A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. 6 And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labour. 7 Then we cried to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. 8 And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, 9 with signs and wonders. 10 And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. 11 And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which you, O LORD, have given me.' And you shall set it down before the LORD your God and worship before the LORD your God. 11 And you shall rejoice in all the good that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house, you, and the Levite, and the sojourner who is among you.

“Who Are You?”

You may or may not remember the Vice-presidential debate of the 1980 Presidential election down in the States. I remember it very well. It was the evening that the Vice-presidential candidate for the Reformed Party, Admiral James Stockdale, shot his party's presidential candidate, Ross Perot's, campaign in the foot. The damage done was so politically bad that Perot eventually and unexpectedly dropped out of the race giving some hokey reason that the Bush campaign was going to release to the public some doctored photographs of his daughter. The other two candidates were Democrat Al Gore and Republican Dan Quayle. Unfortunately, of the three candidates Admiral Stockdale was truly the most honourable and capable, yet at the time he was a “persona unknowna” whom Perot had named just days before the debate was to occur. Well, the debate got underway and the candidates were given time to introduce themselves. Gore and Quayle spun off their self-introductions. Then Admiral Stockdale began and in a very gruff voice barked two questions: “Who am I?” and “What am I doing here?” The audience began to laugh and then kept laughing for so long that it was quite humiliating for the Admiral, a former Vietnam hero and POW. To make matters worse, he then bumbled and rambled his way through the rest of the debate clearly demonstrating that he was just not prepared for the evening. But, the whole debacle made the public question whether he was prepared to be president if something should happen to Perot. The two questions, which were supposed to be his attempt at assuming the public would be asking who he was and what he was doing there, the press turned back on him as if he were asking them about himself as if he did not know who he was or what he was doing there; a truly unfortunate late-life stamp on a man who was indeed one of America's greatest.

Nevertheless, those two questions, “Who am I?” and “What am I doing here?” are important. They involve our self-identity and sense of purpose. Unfortunately, in our culture our self-identity gets tied to our purpose and we usually reduce our purpose to being simply what we do. And, if what we do is something we find meaningless or of little value or if our significant community deems it meaningless or of little value, then we view ourselves as meaningless and of little value. This is tricky business because it can be very self-destructive.

Speaking for myself, I become acutely aware of this whenever I go to Presbytery or when people ask me what I do. I'm a minister of a small church and there's quite a prejudice out there regarding small churches. Big spells success and small spells failure. Therefore, if you are a small church minister, then there is something wrong with you; you're a geek or have no drive to achieve. Apparently, I am of less value than a minister of a big church. This is particularly true in the world of Presbytery politics where the big pulpit pastors get what they want and my opinion is of little consequence. But, that's thinking like the world. In the church those values are supposed to be turned upside-down. Next to churches where everybody hates each other and you're the minister that has to sort that out, the small church is by far the most difficult as well as rewarding area to serve. If the church is new humanity reflecting the image of the Trinity, then the church is inherently about relationships and this is intensely true of small congregations. In the big church the person you don't like sits across the room from you and you can ignore them. In the small church, they sit at the same table as you and you have to relate, and indeed it has to be according to the standard of love that Jesus commands for all eyes are watching. The church is the place where the greatest is the one who humbly and compassionately serves, who gives their self for others rather than using things like achievement, status, and wealth as the basis for posturing for position in the midst of others. Meaning and purpose arise not from what one does for a living but from what sort of person you are in your relationships.

For example, my elementary school janitor, Charlie, a Christian man; his purpose was to keep the school clean for all the children who attended there. It was a tough job particularly when some little prankster thought it would be fun to stick wads of wet toilet paper to the bathroom ceiling or overflow the toilets. Charlie was the one who came to the classroom when somebody barfed on the floor and sprinkled it with that weird smelling absorbent sawdust stuff and then

scooped up the wad and mopped the floor. He found meaning in serving in that way. Some people would judge Charlie saying he could have done better if he'd had more education and value him as less than the teachers and the cafeteria workers and secretaries. Yet, I don't remember Charlie for how good a job he did. I remember Charlie because he always smiled at us and took the time to say hello and strike up a conversation. He had a gift for making children feel important. Of all the teachers and school staff I've had through elementary and secondary education, I only remember the first name of five or six of them and we were never allowed to call them by their first name. Charlie, on the other hand, I remember him only by his first name. Charlie was a Christian and known to be very active in his church and this carried over into how he related to children and everybody else at his job.

Back to the questions, "Who am I?" and "What am I doing here?" are the questions that have defined what it is to be human in Western culture since the Renaissance. Trying to find answers to those questions as they stand are what drives the rampant narcissism that has so taken over our culture. Unfortunately, as human beings we need to find answers to them. Truly whenever there is major change or crisis in our lives we will inevitably struggle to find answers to them. Therefore, those questions need to be answered in the context of two greater questions if we desire not to destroy humanness with them. The questions we need to ask first are "Who is God?" and "What is God doing here?" In this context, who I am is found in the midst of God's steadfast love and faithfulness and my purpose is found in the midst of God's orkings to reveal himself to and save his creation.

Looking at this morning's passages, to speak generally about Satan's tempting of Jesus, all three of those temptations were an attempt to get Jesus to use his identity and purpose as God the Son/Creations Messiah apart from the nature and purposes of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus could have said, "I am the Son of God, the Saviour, therefore I must feed the hungry starting with myself." He could have said, "I am the Son of God the Saviour, therefore I must reveal myself to the world by putting God and his promises about me to the test." Finally, he could have said, "I am the Son of God, the Saviour, the kingdoms of the world shall be mine but in order to do this I will have to bow at the altar of almighty power and there will be some left behind." If Jesus didn't framed his life within who God is and what God is doing in the world, the results would have been unimaginable.

Our passage from Deuteronomy gives us an idea of how to define ourselves according to God's steadfast love and faithfulness. When the Israelites harvested their first crop in the Promised Land they each were to bring the first fruit to the priest and there remember who they are and what God in his love and faithfulness had done for them. First of all, the "I" is a part of the "we". The Israelites did not define themselves apart from what God had done for the whole people of Israel. In like manner, we are not to define ourselves apart from what God has done for all of humanity and indeed all of his creation in saving us in, through, and as Jesus Christ and making us new by the gift of the Holy Spirit as a deposit towards the day when all things will be made new in the glory of God. Secondly, they each remembered that they were the common descendent of a man who was a nomad. In the Middle East then and even today, those who live the nomadic life are not regarded as being high on the social ladder. Lastly, they each were to remember that they were once slaves in Egypt and by a mighty hand God freed them and brought them forth from Egypt and gave them the land he had promised to Abraham. They were to remember God's love for them and his faithfulness and stand before him in grateful awe.

Grateful awe of God is the place where we must find ourselves standing before we can ever answer, "Who am I?" and "What am I doing here?" We all for the most part have defined ourselves apart from who God is and what God has done for us according to his purpose. We've used the lives God has given us to feed ourselves, to make a name for ourselves, and to try to create a domain in which we reign. Yet, for some reason God has chosen to free each of us from that slavery and give us the gift of faith in the sure knowledge of knowing he loves us. For some odd reason not of our own choosing, God has made it so that we are believers. We know he raised Jesus from the dead, because the very word by which he did so is in us by the gift of the Holy Spirit. For some odd reason, we know we have reason to hope and therefore live accordingly. For some odd reason, God has made it so that we know that death and decay and tyranny are not the end of his creation. And that's another thing, for some reason God has made us know that this universe is indeed *his* creation and is in his hands. We know that we each have been brought to the place we are in life by God. By his hand he has powerfully brought us into the circumstances in which we live. Why? What's his purpose? What's that odd reason? Well, God loves us each and nothing can separate us from that. By his love he is redeeming his creation and making that freedom evident in those he has called to live according to the Lordship of Jesus in whose image he is recreating us.

So who are you? Above all else you are a child of God whom in his love and faithfulness he has saved. What are you doing here? You are a living witness of the Love of God in Jesus Christ and therefore you must humbly, selflessly, and compassionately in all times and places live according to Jesus one commandment to love. Amen.