

What Are People For?

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

September 1, 2024 AM Sermon

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Deuteronomy 6:1-9

This is the second half of our two-part sermon series focusing on a couple of life's essential questions. Last week we asked the question: What is a person? And we studied the Bible's answer to that which was centered around how we are beautiful, beloved creatures made in the image of God. This week we will look at the second, related question: What are people for? What is our life for? What is life's purpose? In getting the Biblical answer to this question, I will refer to a number of Bible passages in this sermon, but I will begin with this important word from Deuteronomy 6:1-9.

What are people for? Like I did last week, before I get to the Bible's answer to this question I want to think about how our society answers that question. If you grow up in western culture in 2024, if you just immerse yourself in regular life, what does society tell you that your life is for? What do you think? What's society's default answer to this question? I would love to have a group of 17 year olds in a room and ask them that question. I'm really curious what they would say.

As I thought about this question this week, I thought about children with Down syndrome in Denmark. Back in 2020, Sarah Zhang wrote an article in the Atlantic Magazine called the Last Children of Down syndrome. The article noted how the number of children born in Denmark who have Down syndrome has crashed over the last 15 years.

Why the crash? In the early 2000's, Denmark began to offer free pre-natal testing for mothers early in their pregnancy. The testing was intended to be preventative medicine. It was meant to enable early testing of an array of diseases that could be treated in utero, but one of the things the tests also revealed was whether or not the child in the womb had the extra chromosome associated with Down syndrome. All of a sudden, mothers who would otherwise not have known until birth about the condition were finding out in their first trimester. And you can guess what happened next...most of them decided to abort their child. In 2019, do you know how many Mothers chose to carry their Down syndrome babies to term? Seven. The tests caused the elimination of all but 7 children with Down syndrome. There were years prior to that where the number was 0. Years in which no children with Down syndrome were willingly carried to term, years in which they were all aborted. As a result, children with Down syndrome are vanishing from the streets of Denmark.

The article is not written from a Christian perspective, but the author is clearly uncomfortable with this trend. Effectively, these parents are put in a position where they are forced to answer the questions we've been considering. What does it mean to be a person and what are people for? Only they weren't facing it in the abstract; they were facing it in a very real way for the child moving around inside of them. Here's how the article puts it: "Suddenly, a new power was thrust into the hands of ordinary people—the power to decide what kind of life is worth bringing into the world." That most of the parents decided that the life inside them was not worth bringing into the world is, first of all, tragic and deeply sad. But second of all, the choice suggests that Danish culture has a default answer to our question about what a human life is for, a default answer that excludes children with Down syndrome. As Sarah Zhang herself puts it in the article: "when the decision so overwhelmingly swings one way—to abort—it does seem to reflect something more: an entire society's judgment about the lives of people with Down syndrome."

What's the judgment? Why are these lives judged to not be worth living? I think the decisions of these parents show that we in the west have a default view that a person's life is for success, productivity and utility. A person's life is for doing and making and building and accumulating. We call a human life successful and good when it shows skills and knowledge that build something, that grow society. And somehow the judgment is made that a child with Down syndrome can't build the skills to really contribute. The judgment is made that a Down syndrome child will be a net drag on the family and on society, they will cost too much money, they will take too much energy, and so the pregnancy is terminated. What is a person for? Success. Productivity. Efficiency. Skill. Mastery. Wealth creation. Utility.

Let me be clear, I am not singling out a group of far-away Danish parents who made a choice we may not like. I'm talking about us. I'm talking about the way we see the world. I'm talking about how we value life. I'm talking about how we have been conditioned to think about what counts as a successful human life.

Because if you look at how we order society we are trained in the same values. Think about it: What are the measures we use to measure the success of our society? How do we measure the health of our country? GDP, inflation rate, unemployment rate, the Dow Jones, the S&P 500, mortgage rates; economic categories dominate. And what's the body language of that? If that's the way you measure success in society, what does that make you think people are for? Success, productivity, mastery, wealth creation. By that measure can a child with a disability grow the economy or is she a net drag on the economy? If those are our main measures, where does that leave the children of Down syndrome.

Or take the ways we measure and assess children as they grow. How do we assess whether or not they are progressing successfully? We measure their marketable skills. What are their reading scores? What are their math scores? What's their GPA? What did they score on their ACT? How many goals did they score in their soccer season? Did they make varsity cross country? What chair did they get in the violin section? Again, what's the body language of all those measurements? These all form a picture of what a successful life looks like. And, where does a child with Down syndrome fit into that picture? These Danish parents may be the ones making the decision, and we may judge that decision from a distance, but it's our society, the society we've created, that's helping to push them toward that decision.

Please don't misunderstand me! I am not saying economic measurement is bad or that a market economy is bad. Nor am I saying that we shouldn't have grades or report cards or achievement testing in school. On the contrary, I think those things are very important. But when those things become the frame through which we measure a life. When those measurements become the way we judge human worth, human success, human failure, we are asking for a society that will dispose of the weak and the old and the disabled.

What are people for? Here in this place, following this savior (the one who died on the cross), reading this book, we have a very different answer to that question. What are people for? Let me give you the Bible's answer, and then I will spend the rest of the sermon grounding that answer in the Bible and in the work of Jesus. What is a person for? We are made to show love. And more specifically, we are made to show a love that creates communities of well-being. We are made to show a love that creates shalom.

This starts in the nature of God. As we heard last week, we are creatures made in the image of God. And who is God? Erin read 1 John 4 this morning and what did 1 John 4 say? God is love. God is a loving union of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, bonded by a love so strong and so self-giving that it's hard to tell if God is three or one. If God has love at his center, you can be sure that living as His image begins with love at the center of your life.

In the Bible, love is also the center of our moral universe. In any situation you find yourself in, whatever difficult moral decision you can imagine, whenever you find yourself asking, "What should I do here?" God's answer is it starts with love. All the instructions and rules of the Old Testament law begin with love. We see that in our passage this morning. I think most of you know that Deuteronomy 6 verse 4 is one of the most important passages in the life of Old Testament Jews. It's the shema. Devout Jews would say the shema in Hebrew twice a day as part of their morning and evening prayers. Their prayers would center on the call to love God with all their heart and soul and strength. Then they were urged to keep the commandments, but all the keeping of the commandments began with and was rooted in their love for God. They don't keep the commandments with a grim determination to be obedient; it starts with love.

Think of it this way: what's the very first commandment in the ten commandments? You shall have no other gods before me. But that's not a just a rule by itself; it's set in a loving context. The first commandment is an invitation to an exclusive, loving relationship with God. 'Israel, I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt. I have already shown how much I love you and care about you, I want to be in an exclusive loving relationship with you, I show love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.' The first commandment isn't just a rule; it's more like a marriage proposal. Love is the beginning of the commandments and the animating force behind the commandments. And, of course, in the New Testament that is only affirmed and deepened. How does Jesus sum up all the law and the prophets – all the rules of obedience and all the calls to righteousness? Love. Love God. Love your neighbor.

Love isn't just the center of our morality, love is the story. The Bible is a love story. The world was created by God in love. Creation is an act of love. When people sin and fall away from God and turn away from him, God holds the world in steadfast love. At the climax of the story, God sends his son to the world to save it by dying on the cross. Why does he do that? 'God so loved the world that he sent his only Son.' At Pentecost, God sends his Holy Spirit on the church and the Spirit gives us gifts. What's the most important of all the gifts? Love. Love is the greatest gift. And how does the story end? Like a love story. It ends with a wedding. I read Christopher Watkins wonderful book Biblical Critical Theory this summer and he makes this excellent point about the end of the story as portrayed in Revelation 19. At the end of all things the Bible doesn't show us a king getting control over his subjects; the Bible shows a groom marrying a bride. The wedding supper of the lamb, where we are the bride, Jesus is the groom, and we are united with him, in love, forever. The Bible is a love story.

Finally, in the Bible, love is the power. Love is the power that moves things and changes things. That's not only true in the kingdom; that's true in your life. You are what you love. It's the things you love that shape your life. I've told you the story of how that worked in my life. When I was young my parents gave me 8 years of piano lessons which I dutifully attended. But I did not love the piano. I loved sports. I loved baseball, soccer, hockey, basketball. I loved watching and playing those sports as a result I cannot play the piano now, but I can dribble behind my back and shoot a three pointer at a decent rate. I don't know if that's good. I leave it to you to decide whether my loves were properly ordered. Regardless, the story shows that it's the things that you love that shape who you become and what you become. Love is powerful.

But not only are you powerfully shaped by the things you love; you are also powerfully – powerfully – shaped by the people who love you. Look back on your life, who are the people who've had the most influence on you? Who are the people who've made it possible for you to stand on your feet and function as a human being? It's the people who loved you best, isn't it? Love is so powerful in this world. When it comes to forming a life, forming a soul, forming a human being, money looks weak and pathetic beside love. Paul says it well in 1 Corinthians 13. Tongues will pass away, prophecies will cease, knowledge will fade, but in the end love remains. Love never fails, because the greatest of these is love.

To me the picture that really brings the power of love into sharp focus is the moment when all the people were calling on Jesus to come down from the cross. Remember that? 'Come down from the cross and prove you are the Son of God. Jesus if you come down from the cross you will prove that you are really powerful!' For the people around the cross that kind of dazzling forceful power seems like the best and strongest kind of power. That's the power you could use to smash the Romans and bring prosperity to Israel. Make Israel the new imperial power.

But Jesus doesn't get down, because it's not getting down from the cross that's the powerful thing; it's staying on the cross that's the powerful thing. Because staying on the cross is the work of love, and the work of love done by Jesus there will be enough to wipe away all our sin, it will be enough to destroy the power of death, it will be enough to make all things new. It's always been about love. It's love that made us, and it's love that we are made for.

Which maybe goes back to where we started; persons with disabilities and person's with Down syndrome. In the last couple of years, I've talked to multiple people who lost a family member who had Down's or who was otherwise disabled. And when I talked to those family members they were eager to help me understand how important their brother or their sister had been in their life. How powerful. In some cases, that conversation was in the context of a funeral planning meeting where I would be doing the funeral and they were worried that I was going to talk about how much the person suffered with their disability and how good it was that they were now free. 'No,' they said, 'my brother or sister was powerful in my life, so important in my life. God used them. They shaped me. They were a gift'. They don't put it this way, but what I think they are saying is that if God's purpose for us is love, love that creates community, then my brother was just as good at love as I am, in fact, he may have been a little better.

Thanks be to God for his love for us in Jesus Christ. Such strong stuff. Eternally strong. Thanks be to God that he allows that power to flow through us.

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