

<Genesis 1:1-2:4a; Psalm 8:1-9; Matthew 28:16-20>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, Three-in-One and One-in-Three, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

Why?

This is the question at the core of much of our living, whether it be our day to day or encompassing the fullness of our days. Why?

The drive to answer this question became the core of Viktor Frankl's theory on how some people, himself included, survived the camps and the horror of internment in the Holocaust camps, while others did not: that those who had a “why” for which they lived to answer, a meaning and purpose in life that they had found even in such horrible conditions, that those who had determined this had a better chance at survival than those who had given up on meaning and connection to life.

And it is the question which ultimately drives, and from which defines, our understanding of practically any aspect of life, whether it be our day-to-day or encompassing the fullness of our days. Without an answer to this question, even just for this day, we begin to drift and feel disconnected. Without an answer, we find that we are carried along without any actual conviction or connection. And so, it is a question of importance for this day - it is a question we can ask of God as we read again the creation narrative in Genesis 1; it is a question we can ask of the disciples, as they receive the Great Commission from their resurrected Lord and look to the next stage of their ministry; and it is a question that has been asked of our Confirmands as they prepared to join the church: Why?

And one such Confirmand - no names named - responded initially with, “When I was younger, about six or seven, I vividly remember the only reason I enjoyed going to church on Sundays would be because of the snacks after the 10:00 service.”

I could ask any of you what brought you to church today, but the deeper question, the truer question, is *why* did you come to church today?

There is a well-known verse in Proverbs which reads, “where there is no vision, the people perish.” In his book on organizational purpose and leadership, Simon Sinek writes, “Very few people or companies can clearly articulate *why* they do what they do...[and] by *why* I mean what is your purpose, cause or belief? And *why* should anyone care?” The need to determine and clarify our purpose, our *why*, is ever present and ever important.

I've occasionally been struck by a line in our gospel reading, which sticks out to me as being incongruous, and not really fitting. As the disciples gather with Jesus on the mountaintop - in Matthew's gospel it's their first encounter with the Risen Lord after the

resurrection - they worship him but then, as Matthew reports, “*but some doubted.*” That’s always stuck with me. How could these people who have traveled so far with Jesus - physically, emotionally, and spiritually - how could they come to him now across long miles to join him in Galilee where it all began, and come into his presence, and worship him, and then still doubt? The presence of that word, “doubt,” has always been a sticking point to me.

But as it turns out, I am still learning, and in this case, perhaps learning alongside many of you. Because the word “doubt” in the Greek shouldn’t necessarily be translated in the same way that we might define it today, as in ‘I’m not sure I believe at all’. Rather, the Greek word for “doubt” implies a lack of direction, an uncertainty about what the next steps will be. It has little to nothing to do with belief, and everything to do with purpose. With vision. With living into what is coming to be. The disciples didn’t doubt their belief in Jesus, whom they were now worshiping, rather, they were uncertain as to what they would do next with this new reality, and how their purpose would shift and change. They were still committed to Jesus and his calling, they were still committed to the work of seeing God’s Kingdom realized; the only question now was how that would be realized, how that purpose would be lived out.

What is our purpose in the church? Why do we gather each week and do what we do?

At some point in our lives and maybe even for some of us still today, it’s the snacks after worship. Or perhaps, better put, it’s the hospitality and fellowship that come with the snacks - the chance to connect and reconnect, the opportunity to share in life and ministry, and the time to spend in communion with each other. In short, it is the fulfilling of meaningful and purposeful relationship. And that is often our first and primary *why* for coming to church, or for joining in the first place: becoming and belonging to a deeply connected community. That is certainly a dynamic, a purpose which our Confirmands have picked up on and wish to be a part of realizing.

In fact, here, in their own words, are some more of their responses to the question of why they want to join the church, why this is important to them and what they have seen evidenced which they now want to be a part of.

One writes, “That is why I want to join the church, because joining the church means that I can build my relationship with Jesus...my plan on joining this church isn’t just about me.”

Another writes, “I want to join the church because I want to see God in my everyday life...if I join the church and take a step towards God, I can learn to listen to what he’s telling me through the people I associate with.”

And another comments, “I often find myself going to church and feeling a sense of belonging, a place that I can commit to and feel comfortable within...There has never been a moment in the church where I’ve felt disincluded or ignored.”

One other Confirmand, on why they want to join the church, writes, "[Firstly], the sense of family and belonging which being a part of this church would bring to me. This is particularly important as I have seen how this church brings people in and creates a new family which welcomes all."

That's a poignant remark. "...creates a new family which welcomes all." And it brings us back to our Genesis reading of this morning, the story of creation.

"In the beginning, when God created..." or, "When God began to create the heavens and the earth," or even, "When beginning to create...". If we're going to re-identify our *why*, our purpose for this thing we know as church, then it's important to go back to the beginning, our inception, and look at what God is doing from the outset, and which Jesus continues to build upon. And it may not seem as apparent upon a casual reading of the creation story, but within the poetry of these seven periods of light and dark is reflected the purpose and role of creation: as a place of connection, joy, and renewal for both Creator and Created. At the end of each stage of creation, God looks around and before setting it aside, proclaims it good. And then, as we will see later in Genesis, God is in the habit of walking around the garden with humanity in the cool of the day.

The fullness of creation is to enable connection and renewal, to facilitate purpose and support, to bring about communion. To use the words of another one of our Confirmands, "In a world often filled with loneliness and no support, my desire to join the church increases. I see many people struggling without support or guidance, and I value the idea of being part of a community where no one has to face life alone."

The *why* of the church is a two-fold purpose: to join in relationship with God and one another, a holy communion which supports and elevates one another; and to join in the work of seeing that creation continue. To work to see such relationship, as begun in the mystery of the Trinity, realized and lived out, over and over and over again in our world. To be an active participant in this calling and this work, as yet another Confirmand reflects. "[for me], it is a conscious decision to take ownership of my faith and to grow deeper in my relationship with God...I no longer want to simply be present in my church - I want to be committed to it."

Even our one Confirmand who initially came to church primarily for the snacks, has grown in faith to realize the deeper *why* present and at work, to realize the *why* of being a co-creator with God and all of us: "I want to join the church so I can be a role model for other new members of the church just as others have done for me and to become closer to Jesus, so I can learn more of the lessons he taught."

These newest members get it. Through growing up here in the church, and through engaging in the relationship exemplified by the mystery of the Holy Trinity, they understand that the purpose of such a life, the goal and direction of our living and worshiping, is to work toward establishing this communion of faith more fully and more broadly - within our church, within our community, within our world.

All of creation, from its beginning, points toward a God who creates in order to establish relationship - with creation itself, with humanity, with us. As Jesus commissions the disciples to go into all the world, baptizing and proclaiming the good news, it is so that the depth and breadth of that creation may grow and develop. And as we welcome these seven Confirmands into membership, we do so from an example of living out that relationship, that faithful communion with them and one another. This is what it's about, this is our *why* - to see the Kingdom of God realized in the communion we become, with each other and with everyone. May we continue to live as co-creators with the One who created and called us in the first place. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*