

WHAT ARE PEOPLE FOR?

(first in a five-part summer sermon series)

A Sermon on Matthew 10:40-42—Rev. Adam E. Eckhart

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1.

What are people for?

The first time you hear or read that question, it may sound silly. What are people FOR? We usually tend to discuss it slightly differently, asking what is the purpose or meaning of life, but that can turn attention to life beyond ours and beyond our control. What are people for, that specifies things that we are called specifically as humans to do and be. What are people for?

Notice that the word “for” can mean a couple things—it can mean what’s the purpose of people but also what are people in favor of. It implies that we have yearnings, that there is something out there greater than ourselves that we are a part of. What I am for I give myself to.

This question is significant for a couple reasons. First, we need to ask ourselves what people are for in this era when so many people seem to have given up have on traditional institutions, lost a sense of what they belong to and what they believe in outside of themselves. In this socially skeptical age, we benefit from asking ourselves what people are for rather than what people and we are NOT for.

Second, it’s an important question to ask in this era when so much of what we consider good work is being in a sense taken from us. The person who most famously asked the question What are people for? is Wendell Berry who entitled an essay that way in 1985. Berry, a farmer, poet, and professor, asked the question after 40 years of so-called agricultural progress had replaced a majority of farmers with automated equipment. Some economists declared that farmers, and by

implication much of agricultural culture, were becoming obsolete. Back in 1985 this seemed to be a rural problem; now, automation, robotics, artificial intelligence, as well as outsourcing and a growing preference to not interact with people has eliminated or is jeopardizing many of our office, manufacturing, and even service jobs. Some experts claim that half of today’s American jobs will be done by computers and robots in 30 years, and there won’t be new jobs for us to train for. So in a world where we often feel less connected in community and less defined by work that may not be there for us to do in the long run, what are people for?

2.

How we answer that question depends on where we look for wisdom:

If we turn to pure science, we might answer that people are for carrying on the species, surviving and procreating.

An economic answer might be that people are for building up a stable economy for maximal utility, including the consumption of goods and services as well as profits.

The psychological answer would suggest people are for self-actualization while the sociological answer might express that people are for living in harmony.

Artists might suggest that people are for beholding and creating beauty; historians might say people are for learning from the past and moving into a better future.

And for the last 241 years, our Declaration of Independence seems to suggest that people are for

freedom, for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Then there's philosophers, who depending on their stripes might suggest that people are for fighting existential fear of death, for hedonistic pleasure, or for detaching one's emotions from the circumstances that might otherwise overwhelm you.

And there's probably something to just about all of those perspectives.

But as a Christian community, we can look first to our faith in God and our faith tradition for clues as to what people might be for. And don't forget, our tradition lifts up not only the Bible but also the history of our tradition (the church); reason; and personal experience for discernment.

Still, the Bible seems like the most universally Christian place to start.

3.

We have to contend with the creation story—or stories—to contend with what the Jewish and Christian traditions say people are for. This is the story that claims to describe how and to some extent why God creates humans, so it inherently is loaded with meaning as to the purpose of people.

First, people are creatures, created as the pinnacle of creation. They are created with God saying to some other divine or heavenly beings, "Let us make humankind in our image." So perhaps our first answers to what are people for that are theological, that have God in the sentence, are: "People are for God. People are for God to create. People are for God to create in God's image."

Next, God says, "Let them have dominion over" the earth, and later God adds, let them subdue the earth. People are for overseeing earth for God.

And then God says to the first couple, "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth...." People are apparently for procreating.

Now at another time I'll reflect some more on these claims about people—especially about having dominion and being fruitful and multiplying. For now let's just say that humans are struggling with whether there are limits to these purposes, whether too much dominion over the earth is healthy or not and whether, with 7 plus billion humans now inhabiting this planet, we can hang up a banner that reads: "Fruitful and Multiply Mission Accomplished!"

4.

But for today, we have to skip ahead to the Gospels. What does Jesus say and do that reveals to us what people might be for? Well, as I said previously, being for something can mean both having a purpose and having a longing or favor for something or someone. At the intersection of purpose and longing is a sense of belonging. What people are for says where or to whom they belong. And to belong means to be connected by love. So in Matthew 22 Jesus gives the love commandments: "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" If these are what God commandments above all else, then it makes to say that this might be what people are for. People are to love and therefore they are for God. People are to love neighbor and therefore are for each other. People are to love themselves and therefore are for themselves. And because we're for each other and people are creatures, I think we can add that people are for creation.

People are for loving God, each other, creation, and themselves.

Now this alone doesn't sound like a big deal; any greeting card could duplicate the sentiment and few people would blink an eye.

But the thing that makes Jesus unique and our savior is that he really means that people are for

God and neighbor, as well as creation and themselves. This is how Jesus can say in today's reading, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." Because people are for loving God, each other and all creation, it's all part of the same purpose, so that even the boundaries between God and neighbor get blurred. "Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward." Jesus's disciples are for God and all people. Elsewhere Jesus clarifies this means his disciples pray and love enemies, he clarifies that if we're for God and each other it even means forgiving over and over again when people ask for forgiveness. Disciples are for truly loving God and truly loving each other.

5.

This is why we get so filled with the Spirit when at baptisms we say to God, the families and each other, "We promise our love, support, and care." We don't know if these kids will be saints or holy terrors or—God help us—just like us. But we are Christians, which means that we are imperfect but people who are for God and for each other.

This is why 28 people are going on a mission trip to northern New Jersey to help rebuild the homes of people they've never met and may never see again after this week. Because Christians are for God and for each other, friend and stranger.

What makes Jesus unique and our savior is that he follows through with this purpose of what people are for. What makes him unique and our savior is that he fulfills this purpose both as human and as God, who loves us and all creation, really loves us.

At the communion table, Jesus says, This is my body which is broken—FOR YOU. This is my blood, which is shed—FOR YOU. This is my new covenant sealed by my blood that I, Jesus, forgive you; I am FOR YOU UNCONDITIONALLY.

6.

The Good News this Independence Day weekend and at the outset of the mission trip is that God has absolute freedom and yet God is FOR us and all creation. God can do just fine without us but chooses to love us, to be for us, and Jesus embodies that unconditional and undying love.

We then are for God who is for us. Being for God means doing things that sound overwhelming like giving your life to God, but being for God also first means doing tough things like giving a kid a cup of ice water on a hot day' making somebody who is different from us feel welcome in our neighborhood, workplace, or church; it might even mean smiling at somebody.

What are people for? In our tradition, there's much more that we believe God created us human beings for, but being for God and for each other is a good place to start. Thanks be to God and Amen.