

## Why God Created *You*

1. Warm up: According to scientist Ali Binazir, the odds of you being born were 1 in 102,865,000. That means, before you were conceived, God had 102,864,999 alternative options, yet chose to create the person that is uniquely you. Tell us something that makes you different or unique that we might not know about you.
  
2. Sunday's sermon was the second installment in a series called "By Their Fruit You Will Know Them – 8 Core Characteristics of Authentic Followers of Jesus." Two weeks ago, we looked at the first core characteristic – grace. Jeff called grace our secret Superpower because, when we wield it, grace can literally alter the course of reality. That's a lot of power! But to what end? Why did God call you and me into being and entrust each of us with so much power? Jesus offers a stunning answer to that question in Mark 8:34-35. There he says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the Good News, will save it." Telling people that God wants them to "lose their life" is not exactly a formula for winning friends and influencing people. ☺ And, of course, Jesus wasn't saying we should literally take our life. He was speaking metaphorically. But why do you think he chose to word his message in such provocative fashion?
  
3. George Saunders is a professor of creative writing at Syracuse University. Saunders has written 13 acclaimed novels and last year was awarded the National Book Foundation's medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. In 2013, Saunders delivered a convocation speech to Syracuse graduates that went viral and gave rise to a best-selling book entitled "Congratulations, by the way." In his speech (and book) Saunders identifies Three Great Delusions that he says we must lose, *i.e.*, die to, in order to live fully and joyfully. Jeff suggested that those Three Delusions provide a great explanation of what Jesus meant when he said we must "lose our life to save it." **Delusion #1 is – I am the most important thing.** We all tend to start out life thinking that way. When you're a kid, Saunders said, it's like you're in a movie and you're the star of it. "Your mom and dad are co-stars, and there's a cast of millions, but you're the main thing."
  - a. Do you think that's a fair description of how we instinctively see life as kids?
  
  - b. Some people never outgrow Delusion #1, clinging their entire life to the illusion that the world is supposed to revolve around them. Why is it so tempting to see life that way?
  
  - c. As we're growing up and move into adulthood, things happen that tend to undercut the idea that life is supposed to be all about me. Tell us about something you've experienced on your journey that profoundly challenged the notion that life is supposed to be all about you – your comfort, needs, wants, and dreams.

- d. Do you feel that you personally have abandoned the notion that “I am the most important thing?” If so, about when on your timeline did that happen – and why?
4. **Delusion #2 – I am separate.** In other words, what happens to you doesn’t ultimately matter to me because I’m not you and what happens to you doesn’t affect me. To illustrate this fallacy, Saunders tells a story about a girl name Ellen from his middle-school days who was a shy misfit that everybody made fun of. Saunders didn’t himself make fun of her, but he also didn’t befriend her. He just stood back and let it happen like a passive observer. Looking back, he says that things like that – *i.e.*, ignoring the suffering of others – are his greatest regret in life. In other words, Saunders discovered that we are deeply interconnected and his own happiness is, in fact, intertwined with the wellbeing of others. To this day he still carries the heaviness of what he didn’t do for Ellen. His point being: We can’t be truly happy living as if we are emotionally separated from the plight of people around us.
- a. Who’s someone from your past that you feel bad about not helping when you could have and should have? Tell us what happened and how you feel about it now.
- b. Why is it so scary to realize that we’re not separate from what’s happening to the people around us?
- c. It turns out, Jeff said, that we’re not the star of the show. It’s not all about us. Instead we’re in a “show” much bigger than ourselves – a sacred drama in which were supposed to be helping to usher in the Kingdom of Heaven, so that God’s will can done on earth as it is in Heaven, as God seeks to restore and redeem everything. Matthew 4:17 and 6:10, Acts 3:21, and Romans 8:22. In other words, we’re called to embrace the truth that we are meant to be part of, and devoted to, something much greater than ourselves – God’s redemptive work. How do you feel about that? Does it excite you? Scare you? Do you feel you’ve abandoned Delusion #2?
5. **Delusion #3 – I am permanent.** In other words, living in denial about our mortality. The notion that death is for other people, not me.
- a. What is the downside of buying into Delusion #3? How does refusing to live with an awareness of our mortality adversely affect us?
- b. How do you feel about your own mortality? (Let’s be honest, because this is a really deep issue in life and something we seldom like to ponder.)
- c. What are the benefits of embracing our mortality? Have you embraced it?
6. To sum up, to live fully we have to die to our personal egocentrism as expressed in the foregoing Three Great Delusions. When we do that, Jesus promises, far from losing our life, we’ll actually find it – as we allow ourselves to become part of something much greater than ourselves, something of cosmic importance, to make earth more like heaven and bring creation closer and closer to its redemption and restoration. That’s our reason

for being. Ok, so how do we do that on a practical, operational level? Let's read Matthew 20:20-28, as printed below.

- a. In this passage, James and John conspired with their mother to try to get Jesus to promise to make them the two most powerful people in his coming Kingdom. What does that tell us about the lens through which James and John were still viewing life?
- b. In your own life right now, where are you tempted to ask or expect God to do something similar (in your own life context) to what James and John were asking? Is it wrong to ask for things like that?
- c. Look again at verse 25-28, where Jesus describes a core characteristic of every authentic follower. According to these verses, what is our highest purpose in life? And how do you feel about that?
- d. As Fred Rogers (*i.e.*, Mr. Rogers) said, "Life is for service." But seeing yourself as a servant is not an easy way to live. So why is a life of service the path to our deepest joy and meaning? How would you explain it to someone?
- e. Tell us about a time when you were able to be a servant and it brought you great joy.

## **Matthew 20:20-28**

20 The mother of the sons of Zebedee [ZEB-uh-dee], James and John, came to Jesus with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favor of him.

21 Jesus said to her, "What do you want?" She said, "Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom."

22 But Jesus answered them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" James and John said to him, "We are able." 23 He said to them, "You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father."

24 When the other ten [disciples] heard it, they were angry with the two brothers. 25 But Jesus called them all to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. 26 It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; 28 just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."