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**Living to Serve God**

Matthew 4:10

One of the central themes of Scripture is our failure as human beings to grasp the essence of who we are. In the third chapter of Genesis we find the first humans beginning their existence by learning to live in obedience to God. They are at home in the garden. They are at home with themselves. And they are at home with God. But eventually they listen to the voice of the tempter who tries to teach them that they are missing the best that life has to offer. There is knowledge, status, and power that could be theirs if only they will set aside their life of obedience to consume the forbidden fruit. When they eat this fruit everything changes.

In one way the tempter is right. The tempter had promised that eating this fruit would open their eyes to see what they had never seen before. They do see more clearly. But this “seeing” is not really a blessing. What they see is that they are naked. There are not enough fig leaves to cover up the fact that they are no longer at home with themselves. They are no longer at home with one another. They are no longer at home in the garden or at home with God. Created to worship and serve God, they have lost their way.

Last week I watched a presentation on PBS featuring financial advice commentator Suze Orman. She is someone I usually cannot watch for more than five minutes at a time. But on this occasion she drew me in by confessing that for some years her advice to people had been wrong. She said that she had been telling people that they needed to live within their means when she should have been teaching them to live below their means. She gave two reasons for this. One reason is that living below our means is the only way for many of us to survive the kind of economic down turn our country has been through in the last few years. The other reason has to do with who we are as human beings. She confessed that much of her advice in the past has reinforced the tendency of people to understand their worth as human beings in terms of how much they could afford to consume. That may be what our market driven culture wants us to believe about ourselves. But that is not who we are. Orman says she now wants to teach people to quit measuring themselves by the abundance of their possessions.

William Willimon is a church leader who tries to be this kind of teacher. He describes the challenge of teaching the gospel in these words:

Once during the middle of a sermon just before the annual orgy of buying that we once called Christmas, I said, “If you bring a young child, say a child of five or six, into this church, the child will be disoriented, will need instruction, will not know what to do next. If you take the same child into Toys ‘R’ Us, no instruction will be required.” Then I caught myself in mid-sentence and said “No that’s not fair to the folks at Toys ‘R’ Us, who have spent millions and utilized the best minds that we can produce to instruct this child ... that the whole purpose of life is consumption ... (Journal for Preachers, Lent 2011, pages 34-35)”.

Scripture warns us that those who have been formed by this ethic of consumption will never be at home with themselves or with God. This is not who we are. We were created to worship and serve God. This is the truth the Church is called to teach.

A painful time of testing in the life of the Scottish reformer John Knox came when he was forced to flee from England when the Catholic Mary I became queen. Knox had been one of the leaders of the Protestant reform movement in England which had been encouraged by the previous monarch Edward VI. Knox was following events in England from France which was his first stop as an exile. His heart was broken by reports of friends being burned at the stake. But he was also crushed to see how readily the English people accepted these cruel measures and the return of the abuses of the old church.

Knox asked the question, “What did we do wrong?” “Why are the people so willing to turn back the clock?” He concluded that the leaders of church reform (including himself) had failed to do their job. The Protestant nobility had been too obsessed with the reallocation of the fabulous wealth of the old church and had taken their “eyes off the ball”. Prominent preachers like himself had been too “puffed up” by the compliments of their admirers and had failed to confront the greed of the nobles. Their primary calling was to teach the people how to worship and serve God and they had failed to do it. Because the people did not know their true spiritual identity the new queen had a free hand to institute her repressive measures. (Rosalind K. Marshall, John Knox, pages 64-67, 72-73).

This question of identity is at the heart of the testing that Jesus undergoes in the wilderness. All three temptations challenge the notion that Jesus is called to worship and serve God and to teach others to do the same. Behind these temptations is the voice that would teach us that there is knowledge, status, and power that can make us independent of God. It is the same drama which was played out in Genesis 3, but this time the result is very different. By living to serve God Jesus becomes the teacher who demonstrates what God created us to be.