

There's a Wideness in God's Mercy
Reading from the New Testament: 1 Peter 2:1-3, 9-10
Reading from the Old Testament: Deuteronomy 7:7-9

The late author, Tom Wolfe, had rare capacity for examining the lives of the privileged and entitled few, putting their habits, hubris, expectations, and anxieties under a high powered literary microscope. In his novel, *I am Charlotte Simmons*, Wolfe takes his microscope and laptop onto the campus of an elite, expensive, and exclusive university that at times sounds suspiciously akin to a certain gothic-halled Methodist school three hours east of here; a college that just happens to be where the author's daughter matriculated. The name of the fictional university? Dupont University. Hmmm... The fictional school is known for basketball royalty, academic brilliance, and a heavily intoxicated and salacious social culture of excess and privilege. It is a piercing, often disturbing tale that raises significant questions of both value and values. Yet, as the news anchors say with increasing regularity these days, there are many disturbing images that may not be suitable for all ages, particularly parents preparing to send their first child off to college.

One of the narrative threads that weaves through the novel is the odyssey of the starting forward on Dupont's national championship

basketball team. JoJo Johanssen was a 6'11", 250 lbs towering five-star recruit, who now as a junior is fighting for his basketball life, his relevance threatened by the newer, more-hyped recruits. His reign as a big basketball god on campus may not, cannot, will not last forever with its riches of "VIP treatment and obsequious adulation," along with the bounty of pampered living arrangements and booster provided luxury SUVs. Yet, until it ends, the ride will be obscenely opulent and academically cushioned.

A late-summer practice session skirts NCAA rules by masquerading as a pick-up game, but throngs of local fans and incoming freshmen, on campus for orientation, don't usually show up for a pick-up game in the hallowed arena, with its rule-bending coaching staff skirting ethical boundaries by closely monitoring play up in the cheap seats.

Wolfe observes that JoJo had never gone through freshman orientation, because basketball recruits were exempt from things like that. In fact, "They barely saw non athlete students except in the form of groupies, fawning admirers or students who happened to be in the same classes they were." When the legendary coach, Buster Roth, signals from the cheap seats that the practice, er' pick-up game, was over, Wolfe says, "The

fans descended from the stands in a pell-mell rush and thronged the players. So easy! No security guards to impede their worship! They could *touch* them. JoJo was surrounded. He was mainly aware of the crop of ballpoint pens and notebooks, notepads ... and pieces of paper thrust up toward him ... a great buzzing hive of fans ... Consciously, the players regarded this hiving as a tedious fate that befell them as part of their duty as public eminences. Unconsciously, however, it had become an addiction. If the day should come when the hives disappeared and they were just a group of boys walking off a basketball court, they would feel empty, deflated, thirsty, and threatened.” (Tom Wolfe, *I am Charlotte Simmons*) And isn't that ironic, because those whose god is the fantasy of a privileged lifestyle so often find themselves feeling empty, deflated, thirsty, and threatened once they acquire it. Author Jeremy Adam Smith wisely observed that, “Entitlement is such a cancer, because it is void of gratitude.”

I find myself uncomfortable with the word *deserve*, perhaps because it is such a dangerous word. It is a word that feeds arrogance, nourishes narcissism, breeds indifference to suffering, and evades responsibility. Whenever a gift, an inheritance, a privilege, an office, an ability, a possession, or even a love is assumed to be deserved, it immediately loses

value, its luster dimmed, its usefulness downgraded, its stewardship ignored, its care neglected, its purpose lost, and its giver diminished.

I think that is why I cherish the reminder I often quote from *The Confession of 1967*: “Life is a gift to be received with gratitude and a task to be pursued with courage.” This truth is the primary theme of the book of Deuteronomy, that complex fourth pillar of the Pentateuch that, despite its problems and controversies, still holds an essential word for the people of God in every age. Deuteronomy is presented as the speech of Moses to the people of Israel as they prepare to enter the promised land. It is a second declaration of the Law of God first received by Moses on the mountain of God in Sinai. Now, it is important to know that scholars understand that the present form of Deuteronomy, as it is found in both the Hebrew Torah and the Old Testament of the Bible, contains a core of ancient Mosaic teachings and writings that were collected, edited, ordered, and expanded in the latter half of 7th Century BCE, pre-exilic Judah.

A primary figure of that time was King Josiah of Judah, whose aim was the reformation of a people and a nation weakened by a sense of entitlement, an indifference to purpose, a series of corrupt and self-seeking

leaders, and a general willingness to follow whatever trendy deity of the month was on sale in the religious marketplace. The alleged discovery of Deuteronomy by priests in the temple provided the juice for Josiah's efforts. Josiah's reformation was an attempt to return the people of Israel to their covenant faith with the Loving God who had delivered their ancestors from slavery, formed them as a people, and brought them to that land flowing with milk and honey that they were now in danger of losing. The people had treated their covenant with God like the contents of a second tier swag bag at an awards show, *Good enough, I suppose, but not as glittery as the ones they're giving out in the other line; the ones we should be getting.*

Josiah understood what Amos had once proclaimed, "Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph." Josiah intuitively knew what Jeremiah was declaring around the same time: "Return, faithless Israel, says the Lord. I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, says the Lord; I will not be angry forever."

Therefore, the impetus of Deuteronomy is to get across that very idea reflected in the Confession of 1967: Life is a gift to be received with

gratitude and a task to be pursued with courage. Life is a gift from God, and in the case of ancient Israel, it is a gift that comes with a responsibility and a purpose. In Deuteronomy 6, we read, “When your children ask you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the Lord our God has commanded you?’ then you shall say to your children, ‘We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. The Lord displayed before our eyes great and awesome signs and wonders against Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household. He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors. Then the Lord commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our lasting good, so as to keep us alive, as is now the case. If we diligently observe this entire commandment before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us, we will be in the right.’”

Let us be clear, “being in the right” is not a cause for arrogance or superiority, rather it is about a faithfulness to the task of reflecting the value of covenant faith and the steadfast love of God to the world. When God set forth that original covenant with Abram, he promised that through his heirs,

the covenant people of Israel, all the peoples of the earth would find their blessing, a promise we see fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

In the verse before our text today, Moses declares, “For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession.” Okay, that’s a tricky statement there, because when you hear words like *chosen* and *treasured* directed to you, there’s a real temptation to start believing you are a little more special, more deserving, more entitled than everybody else.

Remember JoJo, the basketball star in Wolfe’s novel? After that scrimmage/practice, he gleefully discovers someone has slipped the keys to a gleaming, hulking, customized pickup sitting in all its glory right in front of the entrance to the basketball arena — the Chrysler Annihilator, 425 horsepower, “every extra known to American automobile manufacturing,” and bigger than an Escalade. “JoJo tooled around on the campus drives a bit, so that people could envy him for his great 32-valve behemoth; but ... there was almost nobody around, and too few of those who were seemed sufficiently staggered by the sight, not even with the chrome Sprewell spinners playing tricks on their eyes.” He was “cruising along past the Great

Yard on Gillette Way, looking down upon the world, when on an impulse he pulled over to the side and parked — in a no-parking zone, but what did that matter? He got out, stretched his big frame, and began strolling along a path that cut across the Great Yard on a diagonal. *Go, go, JoJo*. He was feeling triumphant and in a mood to be noticed.”

“The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession.” You know, even as those words are escaping Moses’ lips, it’s as if he catches sight of Jojo’s truck in the no-parking zone and JoJo strutting across the Great Yard; because immediately Moses changes his tone to clarify what *chosen* and *treasured* actually imply. “It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.”

Don't get too big for your britches. Don't get above your raising. Get off your high horse. He could strut sittin' down. She's as full of wind as a corn-eating horse. He thinks the sun comes up just to hear him crow.

Hearing words like *chosen* and *treasured* directed your way can get you in trouble real fast, for as the *Urban Dictionary* points out, "Often times, the person who thinks they are 'all that' is the only person who thinks they are." Moses says *chosen* and *treasured* and he immediately thinks, *Oops! I'd better bring it down a notch.* "It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples." Hotsy totsy? Uh, uh. Hotsy notsy. Chosen and treasured here have nothing to do with lottery picks, Draft combines, popularity contests, pampered privilege, or fraternity and sorority rush weeks. Israel, here, is chosen and treasured, not because of how great they are, but *How Great Thou Art.*

What we have here is something like the exchange between the Oakland A's general manager, Billy Beane, and aging veteran, David Justice in the classic Brad Pitt movie, *Moneyball*. When Beane senses Justice's skepticism about his tactics, this happens:

Billy Beane : We got a problem, David?

David Justice : No, it's okay. I know your routine. It's patter, it's for effect. But it's for them, all right? [It] ain't for me.

Billy Beane : Oh, you're special?

David Justice : You're paying me seven million bucks a year, man, so yeah, maybe I am, a little bit.

Billy Beane : No, man, I ain't paying you seven. Yankees are paying half your salary. That's what the New York Yankees think of you. They're paying you three and a half million dollars to play against them.

Billy: David, you're 37. How about you and I be honest about what each of us want out of this ... I want the last ounce of baseball you've got in you and you want to stay in the show. Let's do that. Now, I'm not paying you for the player you used to be. I'm paying you for the player you are right now. You're smart. You get what we're trying to do here. Make an example for the younger guys. Be a leader. (*Moneyball*, 2011)

Moses is clarifying our calling. *Chosen* and *treasured* don't have anything to do with stature, resume, ability, beauty, brains, influence, or achievement. *Chosen* and *treasured* are all about God's steadfast love and God's purpose for us. What did the Lord tell Abram? "In you all the families of earth will be blessed." Jesus said, "As I have loved you, so you must love one another." We have God's love and we are called to reflect that love to all the world. It's not about what you deserve. It's about what you've been given and what you need to do with it. As God's beloved, how are you going

to reflect that to the world? Well, when they are hungry, you give them food; when they are thirsty, you give them something to drink; when they feel like a stranger, you welcome them; when they are naked, you clothe them; when they are sick, you take care of them; when they are imprisoned, you visit them. We're not entitled. We are loved. Claim it with gratitude and share it courageously.

Occasionally, you'll see it on a t-shirt, printed on a coffee mug, framed on a desktop, or maybe hear it said to you on a lonely day: You deserve to be loved. I'm not so sure how helpful that is, because it may only serve to exaggerate what you already feel you don't have. Wouldn't it be more helpful to say what is actually true? You are loved ... so what do you plan to do with it? Amen.