

Colossians 3:12-17
July 9, '17

“THE ROAD TO CHARACTER”

(Before Scripture)

THIS SUMMER, WE’RE CONNECTING OUR WORSHIP THEMES TO SOMETHING THAT HAS BECOME RATHER IMPORTANT TO US HERE AT EASTMINSTER – THE VITAL CONNECTION BETWEEN THE WORLD OF FAITH & THE WORLD OF THE ARTS.

WE CALL IT “CHRISTIANITY & THE ARTS” AND WE RECOGNIZE THERE ARE DEEP SPIRITUAL MESSAGES THAT CAN BE FOUND IN ALL OF THE VARIOUS FORMS OF THE ARTS – EVEN IF THEY AREN’T OVERTLY OR INTENTIONALLY RELIGIOUS.

WE’RE LOOKING AT 4 BOOKS, 4 MOVIES & 4 SONGS OVER THE 12 TWELVE WEEKS OF SUMMER.

WE MAY HAVE A BIT OF A VARIANCE HERE & THERE, BUT THAT’S GENERALLY THE PLAN.

TODAY, WE COME TO THE FINAL WEEK OF THE BOOK SECTION OF THE SERIES.

OUR SCRIPTURE READING IS FOUND IN THE LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS.

I USED THIS PASSAGE RECENTLY IN A DIFFERENT SETTING & IT’S ALWAYS BEEN A POWERFULLY UPLIFTING & CHALLENGING PASSAGE TO ME.

WE’RE READING THE 12TH THROUGH THE 17TH VERSES OF THE THIRD CHAPTER – COLOSSIANS 3:12-17.

(After scripture)

I'VE ALWAYS HAD A FONDNESS FOR BOOKS THAT ARE A COMPILATION OF INSPIRATIONAL BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF FAMOUS PEOPLE.

I THINK THAT PROBABLY STARTED WHEN I WAS VERY YOUNG AND RECEIVED A COPY OF THEN-SENATOR JOHN KENNEDY'S PROFILES IN COURAGE, SHORTLY AFTER IT WAS FIRST PUBLISHED.

I WAS NO MORE 8 OR 9 YEARS OLD, BUT I WAS FASCINATED BY THE STORIES OF JOHN QUINCY ADAMS, SAM HOUSTON & DANIEL WEBSTER INCLUDED IN THE BOOK.

SINCE THEN, OTHER SUCH BOOKS HAVE CONTINUED TO FASCINATE ME – TWO OF WHICH STILL OCCUPY PROMINENT PLACES ON MY BOOK SHELVES – ONE ENTITLED GREAT SOULS AND THE OTHER, BIOGRAPHY AS THEOLOGY.

I THINK THAT'S WHY THE RECENT DAVID BROOKS BEST-SELLER – THE ROAD TO CHARACTER – FIRST APPEALED TO ME.

IT INCLUDES A LOT OF BRIEF, INSPIRING BIOGRAPHICAL STUDIES – PEOPLE LIKE PRESIDENT DWIGHT EISENHOWER, LABOR ACTIVIST FRANCES PERKINS, CIVIL RIGHTS LEADER A. PHILIP RANDOLPH & FOURTH CENTURY THEOLOGIAN ST. AUGUSTINE.

THE BOOK OPENS WITH WHAT HAS BECOME A RATHER WELL-KNOWN GUIDE FOR PERSONAL BEHAVIOR – BROOKS' SUGGESTION OF THE DIFFERENTIATION BETWEEN “RESUME VIRTUES” AND “EULOGY VIRTUES.”

IN THE FIRST PARAGRAPH OF HIS INTRODUCTION, BROOKS SAYS, “RECENTLY I'VE BEEN THINKING ABOUT THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE RESUME VIRTUES AND THE EULOGY VIRTUES. THE RESUME VIRTUES ARE THE ONES YOU LIST ON YOUR RESUME, THE

SKILLS THAT YOU BRING TO THE JOB MARKET AND THAT CONTRIBUTE TO EXTERNAL SUCCESS.

THE EULOGY VIRTUES ARE DEEPER.

THEY'RE THE VIRTUES THAT GET TALKED ABOUT AT YOUR FUNERAL, THE ONES THAT EXIST AT THE CORE OF YOUR BEING – WHETHER YOU ARE KIND, BRAVE, HONEST OR FAITHFUL: WHAT KIND OF RELATIONSHIPS YOU FORMED.”

IN ESSENCE, IT'S THE “EULOGY VIRTUES” THAT PAUL IS TALKING ABOUT IN THIS PASSAGE IN COLOSSIANS THAT WE'VE READ THIS MORNING.

EARLIER IN THIS THIRD CHAPTER, PAUL TALKED ABOUT QUALITIES TO AVOID & BANISH FROM OUR LIVES – THINGS LIKE IMMORALITY, LUST, GREED, EVIL DESIRES, ANGER, WRATH, MALICE & SLANDER.

BUT NOW, HE CHALLENGES US AS FOLLOWERS OF JESUS CHRIST – AS “GOD'S CHOSEN ONES” – TO PUT ON QUALITIES THAT ARE DIFFERENT.

HE LIKENS IT TO PUTTING ON AN ENTIRELY DIFFERENT SET OF CLOTHES – A BRAND-NEW WARDROBE.

HE ENCOURAGES US TO CLOTH OURSELVES WITH COMPASSION, KINDNESS, HUMILITY, MEEKNESS, AND PATIENCE.

THESE AREN'T JUST QUALITIES TO “HAVE.”

THEY AREN'T MERELY “TRAITS,” BUT ACTIONS THAT DEFINE CHRISTIAN LIVING.

AS CHRIST LIVED, SO ARE WE TO LIVE.

ONE OF THE THINGS THAT'S FASCINATING ABOUT THE DAVID BROOKS BOOK IS THAT HE ISN'T WRITING FROM A RELIGIOUS OR CHRISTIAN POINT OF VIEW.

THE BOOK, THOUGH, IS LACED THROUGHOUT WITH EXAMPLES OF INDIVIDUALS WHO WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN WHO THEY WERE WITHOUT THE ANCHOR OF FAITH.

DOROTHY DAY, WHO BECAME A CHAMPION OF THE POOR, DID SO BY GOING AGAINST EVERYTHING SHE HAD ALWAYS BEEN TAUGHT BY HER FAMILY.

RELIGION WAS FROWNED UPON & SOMETHING FOR THE INTELLECTUALLY INEPT.

IN FACT, AT ONE POINT, SHE WAS THOUGHT TO HAVE LOST HER MIND BECAUSE SHE HAD BECOME SO COMPLETELY COMMITTED TO HELPING THOSE WHO WERE POOR AND DESTITUTE.

SOMEONE DEAR TO HER ASKED IN DISMAY WHO IT WAS THAT WAS INFLUENCING HER IRRATIONAL BEHAVIOR – PUSHING HER TO AN ARCHAIC AND BACKWARD INSTITUTION LIKE THE CHURCH.

WHO WAS THE SECRET PERSON IN HER LIFE CORRUPTING HER LIKE THIS?

DAY QUIETLY SAID, “*IT IS JESUS. I GUESS IT IS JESUS CHRIST WHO IS THE ONE WHO IS PUSHING ME TO THE CHURCH.*”

IN DAY’S PERSONAL MEMOIR, RECOUNTING THE EVENTS OF HER LIFE & THE PHILOSOPHY BY WHICH SHE LIVED, SHE SAYS,

“*WE CANNOT LOVE GOD UNLESS WE LOVE EACH OTHER, AND TO LOVE, WE MUST KNOW EACH OTHER.*”

WE KNOW HIM IN THE BREAKING OF BREAD, AND WE KNOW EACH OTHER IN THE BREAKING OF BREAD, AND WE ARE NOT ALONE ANYMORE.

***HEAVEN IS A BANQUET AND LIFE IS A BANQUET, TOO, EVEN WITH A CRUST, WHERE THERE IS COMPANIONSHIP.*”**

THIS IS THE ANCHOR OF FAITH THAT GROUNDS EVERY ONE OF THE INDIVIDUALS BROOKS INCLUDES IN HIS BOOK.

AND YET EVERY ONE OF THEM WAS FLAWED IN SOME FORM OR FASHION.

AS BROOKS SAYS, “...EACH OF THE LIVES STARTED WITH A DEEP VULNERABILITY.”

WHEN YOU READ THEIR STORIES, YOU SEE HOW IMPERFECT THEY WERE.

THEY WERE, AS BROOKS CALLS THEM, “STUMBLERS.”

THAT, TOO, MATCHES WHAT WE FIND IN SCRIPTURE.

VIRTUALLY EVERY GIANT OF THE FAITH WE ENCOUNTER IN THE PAGES OF THE BIBLE WAS A STUMBLER - FLAWED IN SOME WAY.

WE’RE ALL FELLOW-STUMBLERS.

EVERY ONE OF US IS A FALLEN & FLAWED CREATURE, MIRED IN SIN.

THAT WORD “SIN” – A WORD WE CONNECT WITH THE LIFE OF FAITH IS A WORD THAT PLAYS A PROMINENT ROLE IN DAVID BROOKS’S BOOK.

HE SPENDS A GREAT DEAL OF TIME ADDRESSING THE LOSS OF AN UNDERSTANDING OF “SIN” AS A REAL PROBLEM FOR EVERY ONE OF US.

HE SAYS, “TODAY, THE WORD ‘SIN’ HAS LOST ITS POWER AND AWESOME INTENSITY.”

THIS ISN’T SOMETHING BRAND NEW.

NEARLY 50 YEARS AGO, THE EMINENT PSYCHIATRIST, DR. KARL MENNINGER PUBLISHED A CONTROVERSIAL BOOK ENTITLED WHATEVER BECAME OF SIN?

I REMEMBER ATTENDING A LECTURE AT WHICH DR. MENNINGER WAS THE GUEST SPEAKER.

ALL THE SEATS NEAR THE FRONT WERE RESERVED FOR PEOPLE IN THE FIELD OF PSYCHOLOGY & PSYCHIATRY.

IN THE COURSE OF HIS LECTURE, DR. MENNINGER ASKED THE QUESTION, “*WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DISAPPEARANCE OF SIN FROM OUR VOCABULARY & WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR SHIFTING THE BLAME FOR ALL OF OUR PROBLEMS & RE-LABELLING INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR TO GET US OFF THE HOOK FOR ACCEPTING ANY PERSONAL ACCOUNTABILITY?*”

DR. MENNINGER PAUSED & THEN FIXED HIS GAZE UPON HIS COUNSELING COLLEAGUES, POINTED HIS FINGER AT THEM & SAID, “*YOU ARE. YOU’RE THE ONES WHO ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR GETTING US INTO THIS MESS!*”

OF COURSE, IT COULD HAVE BEEN A MINISTER SPEAKING TO FELLOW MINISTERS & SAYING THE SAME THING.

IT COULD HAVE BEEN A POLITICIAN SPEAKING TO FELLOW POLITICIANS & SAYING THE SAME THING.

THE POINT IS – WE ARE ALL GUILTY OF TRYING TO ELIMINATE THE WORD “SIN” FROM OUR VOCABULARY & THE EFFECTS OF THAT ELIMINATION ARE DEVASTATING.

I THINK THAT’S PART OF WHAT BROOKS IS TRYING TO COMMUNICATE IN HIS BOOK.

ONE OF THE WORDS & ONE OF THE QUALITIES THAT SEEMS PROMINENT IN THE LIVES OF EACH INDIVIDUAL BROOKS WRITES ABOUT IS “HUMILITY.”

HUMILITY IS AN ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF OUR PERSONAL FLAWS & FAILURES.

**IT'S AN ACCEPTANCE OF THE FACT THAT WE'RE STUMBLERS.
WE'RE ALL SINNERS.**

THE APOSTLE PAUL SO CLEARLY STATED HIS OWN STRUGGLE WITH THIS WHEN HE SAID, “*FOR I KNOW THAT NOTHING GOOD DWELLS WITHIN ME, THAT IS, IN MY FLESH. I CAN WILL WHAT IS RIGHT BUT I CANNOT DO IT. FOR I DO NOT DO THE GOOD I WANT, BUT THE EVIL I DO NOT WANT IS WHAT I DO. NOW IF I DO WHAT I DO NOT WANT, IT IS NO LONGER I THAT DO IT, BUT SIN THAT DWELLS WITHIN ME.*”

I THINK THAT'S WHY PAUL INCLUDES HUMILITY AS ONE OF THE FIVE ARTICLES OF SPIRITUAL CLOTHING WE ARE TO DON AS FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST.

THERE'S COMPASSION, KINDNESS, PATIENCE, HUMILITY – AND ITS CLOSE COUSIN, MEEKNESS.

DAVID BROOKS WOULD SUGGEST THAT THESE ARE EULOGY VIRTUES THAT HAVE BEEN LOST IN RECENT YEARS – VIRTUES THAT ARE VITAL TO BECOMING A PERSON OF HIGH CHARACTER.

OVER THE YEARS, WE HAVE REPLACED THE “LITTLE ME” WITH THE “BIG ME.”

WE'VE MOVED “*FROM A CULTURE THAT ENCOURAGED PEOPLE TO THINK HUMBLY OF THEMSELVES TO A CULTURE THAT ENCOURAGED PEOPLE TO SEE THEMSELVES AS THE CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE.*”

ALL OF THIS CAME TO DAVID BROOKS IN A SERENDIPITOUS WAY.

HE WAS IN HIS CAR, LISTENING TO A BROADCAST OF AN OLD *COMMAND PERFORMANCE* RADIO SHOW FROM THE END OF WORLD WAR II.

HE HEARD BING CROSBY SAY, “*TODAY, OUR DEEP-DOWN FEELING IS ONE OF HUMILITY.*”

AT THE END OF THE BROADCAST, HE ARRIVED HOME AND TURNED ON THE TELEVISION TO WATCH A FOOTBALL GAME.

A DEFENSIVE PLAYER MADE A TACKLE AND DID A SELF-PUFFING VICTORY DANCE AS THE CAMERA REMAINED FIXATED ON HIM.

BROOKS SAID, “*IT OCCURRED TO ME THAT I HAD JUST WATCHED MORE SELF-CELEBRATION AFTER A TWO-YARD GAIN THAN I HAD HEARD AFTER THE UNITED STATES WON WORLD WAR II!*”

HE WONDERED IF THAT SHIFT MIGHT SIGNIFY A SHIFT IN OUR ENTIRE CULTURE – A SHIFT FROM A CULTURE OF HUMILITY TO A CULTURE OF PRIDE & ARROGANCE.

SOMEONE WHO PRESIDENT EISENHOWER DEEPLY ADMIRERD WAS A MAN HE MET FAIRLY EARLY IN HIS LIFE.

LATER, IN THINKING OF THE IMPACT OF THIS MAN & WHAT HE MEANT TO HIM, EISENHOWER SAID, “*A SENSE OF HUMILILTY IS A QUALITY I HAVE OBSERVED IN EVERY LEADER WHOM I HAVE DEEPLY ADMIRERD.*”

WHEN THE ELDER GEORGE BUSH WAS RUNNING FOR PRESIDENT, HE WOULD STAUNCHLY REFUSE TO USE THE WORD “I” IN HIS SPEECHES, THINKING THAT WAS A SIGN OF ARROGANCE.

HIS STAFF TOLD HIM THAT SINCE HE WAS RUNNING FOR PRESIDENT, HE HAD TO BUILD HIMSELF UP SO THAT PEOPLE WOULD TRUST HIM.

ON ONE OCCASION, HE RELENTED & USED A FEW “I’S” IN A SPEECH.

THE NEXT DAY, HE GOT A CALL FROM HIS MOTHER.

SHE SAID, “GEORGE, YOU’RE TALKING ABOUT YOURSELF AGAIN.”

IT WASN’T THAT LONG AGO THAT HUMILITY FROM OUR LEADERS WAS SEEN AS A QUALITY TO BE ADMIRER.

BUT THE FACT THAT THE APOSTLE PAUL INCLUDES IT IN HIS LIST OF 5 ESSENTIAL CHRISTIAN QUALITIES TELLS US THAT IT’S ALWAYS BEEN SOMETHING WE HAVE TO WORK AT.

THE PROBLEM IS THAT WE – AS A CULTURE – DON’T SEEM TO VALUE IT AS HIGHLY AS WE ONCE DID.

HAVE WE COME TO A PLACE IN OUR SOCIETY WHERE PRIDE & ARROGANCE ARE SEEN AS HONORABLE CHARACTERISTICS?

WHETHER THAT QUESTION IS ASKED RHETORICALLY OR GENUINELY IS UP TO YOU TO DECIDE.

AND PERHAPS WE NEED TO ASK THE QUESTION INDIVIDUALLY AS WELL AS COLLECTIVELY.

“HAVE I COME TO A PLACE WHERE I SEE PRIDE & ARROGANCE AS HONORABLE CHARACTERISTICS IN OUR LEADERS – CHARACTERISTICS I WANT MY CHILDREN OR GRANDCHILDREN TO EMULATE?”

IN A GOOGLE “NGRAM” MEASUREMENT OF WORD USAGE ACROSS VARIOUS FORMS OF MEDIA, IT’S INTERESTING TO NOTE THAT WORDS LIKE “GRATITUDE,” “KINDNESS” & “HUMILITY” HAVE ALL DECLINED BY MORE THAN 50% OVER THE COURSE OF THE PAST SEVERAL DECADES.

ONE OF THE TURNING POINTS IN THE LIFE OF DOROTHY DAY WAS LIVING THROUGH THE SAN FRANCISCO EARTHQUAKE OF 1906.

BECAUSE SHE HAD BEEN RAISED IN A HOME VOID OF RELIGION, IT WASN’T UNTIL YEARS LATER THAT SHE WAS ABLE TO

THINK BACK TO THAT EXPERIENCE AND REALIZE WHAT AN IMPACT IT HAD HAD UPON HER.

SHE SAID, “WHILE THE CRISIS LASTED, PEOPLE LOVED EACH OTHER. IT WAS AS THOUGH THEY WERE UNITED IN CHRISTIAN SOLIDARITY.

IT MAKES ONE THINK OF HOW PEOPLE COULD, IF THEY WOULD, CARE FOR EACH OTHER IN TIMES OF STRESS, UNJUDGINGLY IN EMPATHY & LOVE.”

THAT’S WHY THESE WORDS OF PAUL CAN ECHO ACROSS THE AGES.

THEY SHOUT TO US THE IMPORTANCE OF CLOTHING OURSELVES WITH QUALITIES THAT GO AGAINST THE GRAIN OF OUR MODERN SOCIETY.

COMPASSION, KINDNESS, HUMILITY, MEEKNESS & PATIENCE SEEM TO BE IN SHORT SUPPLY.

AS FOLLOWERS OF JESUS CHRIST, PAUL TELLS US THAT “WHATEVER YOU DO, IN WORD OR DEED, DO EVERYTHING IN THE NAME OF THE LORD JESUS, GIVING THANKS TO GOD THE FATHER THROUGH HIM.” AMEN.

***The Reverend Dr. Dennis R. Davenport
Eastminster Presbyterian Church
Evansville, Indiana***