

## **In The Form Of God**

### **Philippians 2:5-11**

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form, he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death  
— even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him  
and gave him the name that is above every name,  
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

# In The Form Of God

Philippians 2:5-11

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Rev. Michael Catanzaro

## I.

I can only imagine that David Brooks is going to be none to happy with old Rev. Mike when he reads this sermon. Yes, we are *actually* going to send it to him; that was the plan from the get-go. As soon as we decided his latest book, “How To Know A Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen,” would be the adult selection for this year’s All-Church Read, I knew whatever sermon came of it I would be sending it to him. I mean, why *not*; right? Seems to me that if you are going to write a book like this, there must be some permutation of the universe where a smart aleck minister (almost certainly a Presbyterian) would write a sermon based on it and, then, have the temerity to provide the author a copy.

To be clear, and in fairness to Mr. Brooks, I *really* like the book; moreover, I *love what* he set out to accomplish and *why*. My issue with it, though, is the book is *incomplete*; it is short one chapter. Which is fine, because we are going to make up the difference this morning here on the Park.

## II.

At the end of the worship service last Sunday, I gave us a little homework, asking each person to consider the question, “If you were to be honored for something in your life, what would you want it to be?” Which is one of the questions to be found on the insert in this morning’s bulletin. While not specifically taken from the Brooks book, the questions are in keeping with the spirit of the book and we hope to use these questions at the pot-luck brunch following worship today toward the goal of having our congregation see each other more deeply. Perhaps we could even be a little intentional about sitting with folks we might not know as well, though I’m sure the experience will be illuminating even with people we have known for years. Regardless of how you do it, or with whom you do it, we’re hoping that folks will come to discover, for themselves, the power of being seen, and the wonder of seeing others deeply.

### III.

Though a challenge to encapsulate such a book in only a few minutes, essentially what Brooks is trying to do is claim the value of community based on authentic relationships. Moreover, he lays out *practical* steps of how we can *actually* do this.

Certainly, we are all aware and lament the fragmentation of our society, the tribalism, the political polarization, and the growing sense of isolation and artificialness born of living our lives more virtually than ITRW (In The Real World). Brooks writes:

*The real act of, say, building a friendship or creating a community involves performing a series of small, concrete social actions well: disagreeing without poisoning the relationship; revealing vulnerability at the appropriate pace; being a good listener; knowing how to end a conversation gracefully; knowing how to ask for and offer forgiveness; knowing how to let someone down without breaking their heart; knowing how to sit with someone who is suffering; knowing how to host a gathering where everyone feels embraced; knowing how to see things from another's point of view." (Pg. 8). If we want to begin repairing the big national ruptures, we have to learn to do the small things well. (Pg. 12)*

Which, to me, sounds very much like what we try to do every day in being this church; which is why we selected the book in the first place.

### IV.

In last week's sermon, where we focused on our *other* All-Church Read selections, Jerry Spinelli's "Stargirl" (for teens) and Kobi Yamada's "Noticing" (for little ones) we used the themes Brooks lays out which begins, in my view, with the concept of a "soul" as the underlying premise. This creates a "posture of respect and reverence, an awareness of the infinite dignity of each person we meet as a precondition for seeing people well." (Pg. 31). Right on, regardless of how one comes to such an understanding; couldn't agree more.

The only problem with such a premise, is that while many may agree with the *idea* of a soul and their equality, fewer and fewer portions of American society are undertaking a disciplined deep-dive on the subject with any kind of structured intention. Which is fine, it just means that the book, and the ideas containing within, become limited in utility and impactfulness. Which is why, I believe, David Brooks is missing a chapter.

## V.

Before we get to that, however, let's review what he has to say in the other chapters of the book. Brooks advocates for us to be "Illuminators." Illuminators trust others before being trusted, they let people be who they are, treating them with tenderness, are receptive to others such that we overcome our own insecurities, self-reoccupation and open ourselves up to the experience of another. Illuminators are actively curious, demonstrate affection, have a generosity of spirit and a holistic attitude. Illuminators understand the attention paid to others as a moral act. (Ch. 3)

## VI.

Brooks also stresses the importance of what he calls "accompaniment"; or, what I would call abiding:

*When you're accompanying someone, you're in a state of relaxed awareness; attentive and sensitive and unhurried. You're not leading or directing the other person. You're just riding alongside as they experience the ebbs and flows of daily life. You're there to be of help, a faithful presence, open to whatever may come. Your movements are marked not by willfulness, but by willingness; you're willing to let the relationship deepen or not deepen, without forcing it either way. You are acting in a way that lets other people be perfectly themselves. (Pg. 46)* In the church, we might call this "fellowship."

Brooks explains that one aspect of accompaniment is "playfulness." "In the midst of play, people relax, become themselves, and connect without even trying." (Pg. 49). Which is why I always lift up our congregation's propensity for laughter, and our willingness to have fun and celebrate at every opportunity.

Accompaniment also involves what he calls, "other-centeredness": "To honor another person's ability to make choices," and "to let them voluntarily evolve." (Pg. 51) A final aspect of accompaniment, which to me is a big one in the church, is "presence." "Presence," says Brooks, "is about showing up"; for those occasions of joys but, especially, during the hard times: "You don't need to say some wise thing; you just have to be there, with heightened awareness of what they are experiencing at that moment." (Pg. 52)

## VII.

In another chapter, Brooks takes up the question, “What is a person?” Here we find the quote from Anais Nin which was running all last week on our sign, and which was used as the jump-off point for last week’s sermon: “We do not see things as *they* are, we see things as *we* are.” The point Brooks makes, is that “people don’t see world with their eyes; they see it with their entire life.” (Pg. 64) If we want to know a *person* more deeply, we have know their *lives* more deeply. He quotes Harvard psychologist Robert Kegan, “What the eye sees more deeply the heart tends to love more tenderly.” (Pg. 70)

While the book goes on to explore much more, and offer any number of illuminating anecdotes, I will end the synopsis part of today’s sermon with his chapter on “Good Talks.” “Good conversation is an act of joint exploration... (which) starts in one place and ends up in another,” (Pg. 73) *Active* listening is an invitation to express. (Pg. 75) We need to “treat attention as an on/off switch, not a dimmer.” (Pg. 75) “If you’re here in this conversation, you’re going to stop doing anything else and just pay attention to *this*.” (Pg. 75). (*Like what you do every week with the sermon.*). Having “good talks” means we are “Loud Listeners,” and “favor familiarity” by recognizing that people “love to talk about what they know.” (Pg. 76)

## VIII.

Brooks encourage us to make people *authors* rather than *witnesses* by asking for stories about specific events or experiences and, then, going even further in asking how others *experienced* what happened. (Pg. 76) One incredibly value technique he offers to ensure “good talks” is not fearing the pause: a good conversationalist controls her impatience and listens to learn, rather than to respond. She’ll wait for the end of the other person’s comment, and then pause for a few beats to consider how to respond to what’s been said. (Pg. 77)

Brooks also advocates what he calls “Looping”: “repeating what someone just said in order to make sure you accurately received what they were trying to project.” (Pg. 78) This is more than “what I hear you saying,” it is a means for us to listen more carefully, and keep the other focus on their core point (Pg. 78)

## **IX.**

A few other ideas for having “good talks” include “The Midwife Model.” Many good conversations are reciprocal. Both people talk about half the time. But some good conversations are, by necessity, lopsided. One person is going through a hard time or facing a big life decision, and the other person is accompanying them in their process of deliberation. In such circumstances, we should remember that, like a mid-wife, we not there to give birth, but simply assist the other person in their own creation. (Pg. 79)

Brooks reminds us to “keep the gem statement at the center”; that is, that thing upon which both can agree, especially when disagreeing. At the point of disagreement, he suggests we try to discover “the disagreement under the disagreement.” That is, what are the *values* disagreement underneath our *practical* disagreement; the real, philosophical roots of why each believes what they do. (Pg. 80) Finally, Brooks warns against being “A Topper”: if we want to build a shared connection, we must sit with other people’s experience, before we start ladling out our own. (Pg. 81)

## **X.**

Now, I admit, that is an awful lot of theory to throw at you in a short amount of time. Moreover, theory is only as good as the results which are derived from its application and implementation. Subatomic particle physics is great, in theory, but until someone came along and actually built a particle accelerator to test and prove the theories, the science was a mere abstraction. What makes the Brooks book such a delight, is we can pick any of these theoretical ideas and test them out in our very own lives; we are our own particular accelerators.

Each of us has the ability and freedom to select and implement any of the ideas from the Brooks book I just mentioned. If you choose to do so, you will *literally* feel as if you have discovered how to work magic. We are not talking about mere card tricks or slight-of-hand but, rather, pulling rabbits right out of hats, escaping locked boxes, and maybe even some astral projection thrown in for good measure. I know, I have tried it, it is *very* cool.

## **XI.**

Which is why all of you are being asked to pick up the magic wand which are the questions in the insert, and wave them around to run the experiment

for *yourself*. This past week, Linda Potter did this very thing: she worked a little magic with the wand on Wanda Renick. Typically, when visiting 95 year old Wanda, Linda will update her on what is happening in the church and with our kids. While I am sure Wanda appreciates this, it makes for a fairly lopsided conversation.

During this most recent visit, however, Linda had the great idea of taking along these questions to wave at Wanda. As Linda recounts it, the magic happened as Wanda astrally projected Linda back in time to her youth growing up on the family farm in Illinois, her life with husband Fritz, and a career spent teaching English to several generations of high schoolers. Even though she has known Wanda for 25 yrs., much of this was news to Linda. It was an ITRW demonstration of the power of being seen, and the wonder of seeing others deeply. For the record, English teacher Wanda was the first to turn in her homework: if she were to be honored for something she'd like it to be for making a difference in the life of her students.

## **XII.**

As we do every time we have a pot-luck or fundraising dinner, the Deacons will be delivering meals to the homebound afterward. Today, though, *I'll* be delivering to Wayne Miller as it happens to be his 104th birthday; and, yes, I will be bringing the questions! Certainly, any who wish to join me are welcome to do so, but there are any *number* of fascinating people in our congregation who would *love* to answer these questions and have such a conversation with *you!* Folks, like Bob and Betty, Donna, Shirley, Lew, Janet, Vern and Arvilla, Marilyn, Christa, Carolyn, Bill and Karen, Melba, and Betsy; to name a few. You could even take notes and we could do a feature of each in the newsletter. I can assure you, if you wave the wand the magic *will* happen.

## **XIII.**

Speaking of magic, of the mystical kind, I am always amazed how the scripture reading from the lectionary aligns almost perfectly with the subject derived from the All-Church Read; this year is no exception. Today is Palm Sunday, and though we are using the Philippians passage as the sermon text, we all know the story: after three years of ministering in obscurity and being understood, only and variously, as a prophet, healer or teacher, Jesus comes riding triumphantly into Jerusalem on a foal of a donkey, with folks waving

palms and shouting “Hosannah” in fulfillment of the Hebrew Prophet Zechariah (9:9). On such an occasion, Jesus is finally being seen, deeply, as Messiah and King. In the spirit of David Brooks, they see his soul for what it is.

We also know, however, how this story ends: with many of those very same folks shouting to Pontius Pilot, “Crucify Him!” only five days later. This gets at what I think is the chapter that is missing from the Brooks book. Seeing the soul in others is a fickle proposition. If we were able to do so, with any kind of depth and consistency, we would not need of such a book in the first place. If we wish to see and value the soul in *others*, we would be wise to *first* endeavor to see and value the soul in *oneself*.

#### **XIV.**

Turning now to Philippians 9, we find the Apostle Paul articulating the theology which comprehends the power of the cross of Christ: (Though) *in the form of God, (Jesus) did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death; even death on a cross.*

Here, though, is the rub; and, it is the same rub I believe to be in the Brooks book: Paul admonitions the reader to let the same *mind* be in us as was in Christ, but he clearly stops well short of calling us to be of the same *form* of God as was he. While the distinction would seem quite nominal, it is actually rather enormous. So much so, that for 2000 years we Christians have been scared silly and stubbornly refuse to crossover the threshold from the mind of Christ to the form of God; because, frankly, we feel it too much responsibility.

#### **XV.**

Of course, this is not without good reason. After all, what we are talking about here is nothing less than idolatry and hubris. Christ, as Lord and Savior, is the *only* son of God, not one among many; this much is wholly and absolutely true. That said, we who are the Children of God, can and should aspire to more than just having the *mind* of Christ, we should also strive to be in the *form* of God.

While the mind of Christ compels us to see the soul in others, when we are



willing to become slaves, servants and mid-wives to others, when we cease to exploit who we are in deference others, when we humble and empty ourselves before others so as to actually hear and see them in the *totality* of their lives, when we are obedient to *their* needs, when we put the lives of others ahead of our own and die to ourselves, we begin discover our *own* souls taking on the form of God as they were originally created and intended to be. We come to discover the power and wonder of seeing *ourselves*, deeply, through the process of allowing others to be seen.

## **XVI.**

That, to me, is the chapter that is missing in the David Brooks book. Not that such an idea isn't there, it is; one just needs to know where to look. Unfortunately, most people do not. Rather than implying such a thing, I would just *spell* it out. To do so, I would perhaps avail myself of the *very* rare opportunity to quote Nietzsche quoting Jesus, "Physician, heal thyself: then wilt thou also heal thy patient. Let it be his best cure to see with his eyes him who maketh himself whole." (From "Thus Spoke Zarathustra")

In fairness to David Brooks, however, that is not *his* job it is *my* job as a preacher, and *our* job as a church. To share the Good News that, through the cross, Christ is making our world whole so that we might grow more fully into the form of God. In other words, to bring hope; first to our own selves, then to those around us and, finally, to the world.

## **XVII.**

Finally, when we began today's sermon (about an hour ago!) I told you I really like this book by David Brooks. I am sure you can, now, begin to see why. I also said, that I love *what* he set out to accomplish and *why*. Which, as I understand it, is to be a voice crying out to a nation sorely in need of it that HOPE IS POSSIBLE. As I quoted earlier, Brooks says, "If we want to begin repairing the big national ruptures, we have to learn to do the small things well." In this, David Brooks is absolutely spot on.

Tomorrow begins holy week. If we want Easter to be more than an excuse to eat ham and hard boil eggs we, as the followers of Christ, need to make the Gospel real for ourselves, and others, in the small things and in the small ways the cross empowers us to be in the form of God. Wave the wand, work the magic, see your own soul as it was created and redeemed to be. Amen.