

“LIES & HOPE”

Sermon Preached by The Rev. William H. Critzman

Sunday, July 22, 2018

Scripture References: Psalm 89:20-37 & Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Today, we hear stories of leadership—of King David’s, of Jesus’s, and of God’s. We hear a promise of God to David in the Psalms. We hear the plans and the change in plans of Jesus. Today, scripture tells us of the promise of what good leadership can bring and the perils of what may happen if we veer from the path to follow a lesser god. These are stories of our faith that call to all of us now, and perhaps should speak especially to those who lead us.

Good leadership, by scripture’s example, is anointed by God and trustworthy for all generations. It is God who anointed David, God who promises to be with him forever: “my faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him.” And from the ever present shield of God’s faithfulness, David shall be exalted not in his own name, but in God’s name. God is speaking through David to lead and guide God’s people, which are David’s people too, which are people not so different from your and my people. People, humans all, who in all our brokenness, all our wayward ways of not staying true, people to whom—above all else—God is always faithful. To King David, God promises that God “will not remove from him my steadfast love, or be false to my faithfulness. I will not violate my covenant.” These are the promises of God to David, to all who lead in God’s name, and to us now. And out of this promise, God says one thing more, “I will not lie to David.”

When we meet Jesus today, it is at the end of a long day of ministry. In the portion of Mark’s story we hear today, it was at the end of another long, hard day when the disciples gathered back at base camp, gathered around Jesus to report-in about what they had been doing, and all the works and healing they had done in his name. Jesus hears these reports with noticeable pride, and says to his troops, “come away with me to a deserted place, all by yourselves and rest.” Jesus the good shepherd who recognizes jobs well done, promises rest at the end of long days and super when there had been no time to eat. But the needs of the people in that area were great, and the news of Jesus and his followers’ acts of mercy had spread far and wide. Though his intention was to lead his followers into a night of Sabbath, the needs of the world and of the people caused a change of plan, a change of heart. When Jesus went ashore with his disciples, he saw how great the crowd was and had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. Tired as they all were, he began to teach and heal. Though it would be understandable if a disciple or two might have felt momentarily annoyed or duped—“wait, I thought this was our time, a time for us and to rest”—scripture reports no grumbling. Good leadership is flexible and responsive. In times of change, good leaders eat last and put the needs of the public good ahead of their private concerns.

Covenants such as that between God and David, or relationships such as those between Jesus and the twelve, or contracts such as what knits our society together are affirmed when truth is prized. God’s promise to David—“I will not lie to David”—may at first sound a bit odd, as if in promising not to do something, it makes the inverse more possible. To what, is it possible for God to lie? Does God lie? Does God have a history of lying to people? That God will not lie to David is great for David; to whom else is God speaking only the truth? These are rhetorical questions, of course; you know as well as I do that God does not lie and that truth is the language God always speaks in love. It does remain, though, that this is a curious statement. If lying is

not in the Divine character, than why would God make such a promise? It's a bit of stating the obvious, like if I stood here and said, "I will keep breathing as long as I can." So certain am I of God's truth; that it's plain as the air I breathe and the ground on which I stand. So why does God say it? Because it's a public pronouncement of a private virtue; it's an affirmation of God's faith in us. In calling David to his own leadership, God takes what is private to God—God's truth, virtue, and hope—and makes it public knowledge.

After a day of public ministry, the disciples gathered around their leader and teacher for a few moments of private respite. Everybody—you, me, the disciples, even Jesus—deserves some time for themselves, some private time to rest, to organize our thoughts, and to speak in quiet voices to those we love the most. Such was the hope when the disciples got into the boat that evening. The plan was for them to rest and to enjoy a night with themselves. But then the world showed up, crowds marched, hungry people came, and sick friends arrived. They had demands. They wanted to be healed, they wanted to see their great leader, they wanted to touch even the hem of his garment, so hungry were they for a leader who spoke truth and prioritized the least of us. Though he had told the disciples they were going to a deserted place for a time of rest, Jesus changes course, changes plans, because the needs of the people were what he was called to address. A good leader is a servant leader. Jesus, and the disciples, put the needs of the public whom they served above their private interests, and they got to work. Acts of great leadership are called "public service" for a reason. They're both for the public, and its service.

This past week, I've been revisiting David Brooks' book from a couple years ago called *The Road to Character*. Through a series of biographical essays, Brooks lifts up characteristics he calls eulogy virtues as opposed to resume virtues as it is the elements of truth, wisdom, discernment, and service that create a life well lived—not just a happy life, or a good life, but a deeply fulfilling, joyful life, a life of abundance like the one that Christ has promised. In the opening pages, Brooks writes of an episode of *Command Performances* he heard rebroadcast one night by happy accident while driving home. This particular episode was the episode first heard the day after V-J Day at the end of World War II. In it, Brooks recounts an all-star line up of the biggest entertainers of the time: Frank Sinatra, Marlene Dietrich, Cary Grant and Bette Davis hosted by none other than Bing Crosby. If these names aren't familiar to you, let me give you a modern day parallel that might be a bit like Lady Gaga, Beyonce, Justin Timberlake, and Taylor Swift hosted by Oprah. It was a pretty big deal, but the bigger deal is how small of a deal Brooks noticed each of the artists were making of themselves. On a day where unbridled celebration and perhaps even a modicum of national hubris could be forgiven, Brooks remembers Bing Crosby's summation of the mood as the "deep-down feeling is one of humility."ⁱ This humility is both good leadership, it's also what reminds us of our morality. A morality that is faithful, that does not tell lies, and that trusts that truth—even when it personally, momentarily difficult—is important.

With a tone that is more reflective than nostalgic, Brooks sets out on this task of mapping "the road to character." He begins, "my general belief is that we've accidentally left this moral tradition behind. Over the last several decades, we've lost this language, this way of organizing life. We're not bad. But we are morally inarticulate." I love this phrase, "morally inarticulate," because it emphasizes how it is the language—not the content—that we've lost. When I was a boy I played the cello. I haven't touched that instrument in probably twenty years. I have no doubt become "cello inarticulate," but I can appreciate the trait no matter how out of practice I may be. I even from time to time imagine what it would take to re-learn the language I once

knew. Brooks goes on, “we’re not more selfish or venal than people in other times, but we’ve lost the understanding of how character is built. The ‘crooked timber’ moral tradition—based on the awareness of sin and the confrontation with sin—was an inheritance passed down from generation to generation... Without it, there is a certain superficiality to modern culture, especially in the moral sphere.”ⁱⁱ

Brooks wrote this just three years ago, and I wonder if and how he might edit this description now. Would he see that these years have been ones of learning to better articulate shared morality, or has there been even more deterioration? How are we doing on the road to character, the road to public leadership infused with private morality? What paths are you on, and me? Is this the path for resume virtues that win the battle, or eulogy virtues that have victory over the war?

You all no doubt have heard of a young fellow called Harry Potter. As an allegory for moral leadership and development of character, he’s a pretty good one chiefly because he’s a young one, one with whom a generation of children have now come of age. If you were 7 years old when the first Harry Potter book was published—seven is the age Harry is in the first book—you would have been born in 1990, which would make you 28 now. If you’re slightly older than this, or if an orphaned English boy wizard isn’t your cup of tea, think of some other literary character you might have grown up with knowing and admiring. Anne, the one who lived in a house with green gables; Christopher Robin, who lived on the edge of a forest one hundred acres in size; any of the children who went through the wardrobe to visit Narnia; Alice who went through a looking glass to discover wonderland; Charlie Brown or his faithful but upstaging pup; anyone who as a child might have taught you something that you remember now, something perhaps that you read to your children or grandchildren. If you’re hunting around for a lightweight book to throw in a beach bag, see if you can find a paperback or ebook version of it and try it back on for size. It may sound odd, but literature written for children or young adults can be terrifically soothing at the end of long days. I also find that it promotes dreams much more exciting than those induced by a pill.

In the fifth book in the *Harry Potter* series, Harry meets a rather sickly sweetly loathsome woman by the name of Delores Umbridge. One of Harry’s teachers, Delores is the type of character who would rather live in a fantasy of politeness and superficial niceties than in the real world, a world that in book five is starting to look pretty bleak indeed. Darkness surrounds. Those who fight on the side of justice and goodness have gone underground. Evil is gaining strength and He Who Shall Not Be Named has started putting puppet leaders into public service roles. The truth is unpopular and regularly decried as lies, and Harry really struggles to figure out how to publicly live his private virtues. This is the part of the hero’s journey that can be a little taxing to read; he has moments of being a real brat and he’s struggling mightily to maintain his own sense of truth in a world increasingly interested in creating a false narrative. In the course of his struggle, Harry at one point says something rather controversial—it’s a plane and simple truth about the evils that surround and the seemingly unstoppable terror of a corrupt man—but polite Delores will have none of it. It goes against her civility. He’s being impolite, brash; she mistakes his truth for arrogance and she punishes him. She makes him write out the line “I must not tell lies” over and over with a rather special pen until the messages has, in her words, “sunk in.”

I must not tell lies is a good starting point for good leadership. It’s the integrity of commitment to what you know to be true, and what you know to be far greater than yourself.

This is the slippery slope David Brooks hopes to correct in a culture that has moved from one of self-effacing humility to self-aggrandizing bragging; it's the essence of that *Command Performance* episode. It's what Jesus and the disciples model when they step off the boat allegedly to rest, but actually to work. It's the promise God makes to David—I will tell you no lies—and it's the public assertion of private conviction. Private convictions that must—if we are to regain the language of morality and truth—must be spoken again and again despite any cost to ourselves as we work for the greater good. At the end of a chapter called “Dignity,” Brooks writes about a philosophy of power in leaders of merit that combines “extreme conviction with extreme self-skepticism.”ⁱⁱⁱ For such a leader, there is none better than Jesus of Nazareth who knows who he is and what God requires him to do while at the same time turns to his friends to say, “who do you say I am?” They, Peter in particular, tell him no lies. God will not lie to us. In this, may we find our hope. In our hope, may we find the conviction to speak the truths that need to be spoken in love and in faithfulness. Our character depends on nothing less. When cultivating the eulogy virtues, what will you say of those moments when lies were spun and truth made to be the enemy?

ⁱ Books, David. *The Road to Character*. New York: Random House, 2015, p. 3.

ⁱⁱ *ibid.* p. 15.

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid.* p. 152.