

WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS

John 6:24-35

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The writer David Brooks believes that most of us want to live good lives, virtuous lives, lives we can be proud of, lives that make a difference. The problem is that there are two kinds of virtues. There are the resume virtues and the eulogy virtues. Resume virtues are the skills we 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 our funerals, the ones that exist at the core of our being -- whether we are kind, brave, honest or faithful; what kind of relationships we have formed.

Most of us would say that the eulogy virtues are more important than the resume virtues, but most of us spend more time thinking about the resume virtues. Our education system is oriented around developing resume virtues. Self-help books focus on them as well. How do we look? How much money do we make? Are we climbing the career ladder? Are we encouraging our children to be winners? The resume virtues focus on words like success and accomplishment.

Eulogy virtues focus on other words, some of which have fallen out of favor in recent years, words like character, conscience, virtue, bravery, gratitude, humility, and kindness.

In his book, The Road to Character, Brooks doesn't advocate a renunciation of the material world, not by any means. But he acknowledges a problem that I identify with. It's in fact a problem that draws many people to church, or back to church, or leads them to call me for appointments and conversations. The problem is that

eventually many people feel dissatisfied with a life based solely on the pursuit of external success.

No matter how much money one has made, no matter how many possessions one owns, no matter how many awards one has been honored, there develops within many people a feeling that something is missing. It may be a vague sense of a lack of ultimate purpose, it may be a growing, nagging awareness that the busy life one is living isn't fully in tune with a person's real identity. It may be that thought or dream that wakes you up in the middle of the night and says to you, "There must be more to life than this."

David Brooks says that the road to character begins with acknowledging that the inner life is as important as the external, material world, and that each of us should pay more attention to the promptings of our own conscience. He encourages us to be aware of the battle for good and evil that is a constant personal struggle, to ask ourselves the deeper questions of life, and to find our way towards a maturity that involves humility. None of us are self-made people. We are dependent upon mentors, and upon God.

It sounds almost terribly old-fashioned, but aren't these the questions that wake us up at night, if we pay attention? "Am I making the most of my life?" "Am I being true to myself, or am I allowing myself to be swayed by what is popular?" "Am I living my life with integrity, according to a moral compass?"

Do we ever take the time to reflect on our lives and face these deeper questions, questions about the legacy we want to leave behind? Or do we escape those hard

questions by going shopping, turning on the TV, or following the latest celebrity scandal?

The prophet Isaiah once put the question this way, “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?”

And in our passage for today, Jesus says, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry.” There is bread, in other words, and then there is bread. There is the kind of bread we need to maintain our physical selves, and then there is another kind of bread entirely, the kind we need in order to live our internal lives with integrity, with meaning and purpose. The people are clamoring for physical bread, and Jesus is anxious to give them the other kind.

This conversation happens immediately after two miracles have taken place. First the miracle of the loaves and the fish, the feeding of the five thousand, one of the very few miracle stories which appears in all four gospels. Jesus leaves the crowd after that miracle, and later that night walks across the water to join the disciples in their boat. The next day the crowds are looking for him again. We get the impression that the crowds are now in a bit of a frenzy. They want to see more magic. And do you hear the irritation in Jesus’ voice? The impatient frustration? He is not a magician and does not want to be seen that way. He doesn’t perform miracles in order to attract crowds. He says to them, “Look, you don’t even understand what’s going on and why. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life.” The crowds press him, they still don’t catch on. “Jesus, we want to believe in you. Do another miracle, like Moses did, when he gave the people of Israel given manna to eat.” Jesus takes a deep breath and answers them, “That wasn’t Moses. That was God. The bread

of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” And the people said, “Give us that bread always.” “I am the bread of life,” Jesus says. “I’m right here among you. What I’m teaching you, this way of life I’m showing you, is what will satisfy your deepest hunger.” There is bread, and there is bread.

We know that there are people in the world who need physical bread. The problem of hunger is very real for millions on our planet and some who live quite close by. In addition to our food drives, our meals for the Haven Center and other forms of outreach, part of the money we give through the church seeks long-lasting solutions to the problem of hunger. Today we’re looking at this passage through a different lens, asking the question, “Besides the very real problem of physical hunger, what else is the world hungry for?” Could it be that our world is hungry for examples of courage and integrity? For an alternative narrative to the one that is told in the mainstream media, that happiness is found in the pursuit of more beautiful bodies, more gourmet meals, more luxurious cars? Could it be that our world is hungry for role models of a different sort? Rather than self-promoting athletes and entertainers, do we need to shine a light on the lives of those who are quietly living with dignity and purpose? While we push our children to win and excel, are we also teaching them kindness and empathy?

Jesus gives us an example of a life that was lived with very little emphasis on worldly success, but with much attention paid to the question of integrity. He constantly went away by himself, to remind himself that his purpose in life was not to attract great crowds or fame, but rather to show people a different way of life, a way of service, a way that finds meaning in suffering, a way of self-giving love.

The great preacher Howard Thurman tells us to know ourselves so well that we know what to do in order to feel truly alive, the life of abundance Jesus talked about and lived. This isn't the same as asking, "What will make me happy?" Abundant life doesn't just focus on our own selves; abundant life is finding our purpose. If we truly know ourselves, we will find our place in the world. "What the world needs," he says, "is people who have come alive."

Once upon a time, a man had a dream that he would find a man on the outskirts of the city who would give him a large stone that would make him rich. The next day he woke up and enthusiastically left home to find this man. He walked around the edge of his city until he found a holy man sitting underneath a tree. Taking a chance that this was it, the man said to the holy man, "The stone! The stone! Please give me the stone!" And he explained his dream to the holy man. The holy man reached into his pocket and pulled out a large diamond. "Here," he said, "the angel probably spoke of this. I found it on my journey here. If you want it, you may have it." The diamond was as big as his fist and perfect in every way. The man marveled at its beauty, clutched it eagerly, and walked away from the holy man. But that night he could not sleep, and before dawn he woke the holy man saying, "The wealth! The wealth! Give me the wealth that lets you so easily give away the diamond."*

The external gift had not given him what his heart desired.

St. Augustine said, "Our hearts are restless until we find rest in God." There is bread, and then there is bread. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. Those who come to me will never be hungry."

*Story shared by Chris Andrews in an article entitled, “The Bread of Life”,

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