



Roanoke, Virginia

May 9, 2021

“Eulogy”

Philippians 3:1-11

George C. Anderson

It has been an unusual week. We had a memorial service on Wednesday, one on Friday, and two on Saturday. As you might imagine, I spent a great deal of time this week thinking about the four people being remembered—the meaning and witness of their lives—the impact they had on their families and friends, the community, this church, on me. I knew I was scheduled to preach this Sunday. I’ve been preaching sermons with one-word titles and I decided to preach on a passage from Philippians and call it “Eulogy.” I guess I have a one-track-mind.

Listen to what Paul wrote, and listen for how he takes assessment of his own life and witness. Most of all, listen for the Word of God.

To write the same things to you is not troublesome to me, and for you it is a safeguard.

² Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh! ³ For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh— ⁴ even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh.

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.



⁷ Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸ More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

David Brooks has undergone a transformation. He became famous as a conservative columnist for the *New York Times*. His voice was mostly a secular one. But for more than a decade now, his writings have become more and more faith based. He is not ordained, he does not have a seminary degree, and for most of his early life he was either nominally religious or agnostic. But at the mid-point of his life, he made a major pivot. He began to explore his Jewish heritage, and it led him to explore the Jewish faith. Then, his life took another turn. He became fascinated with Christian theology. A day came when, if you asked him whether he was a Jew or a Christian, he would not know how to answer except to say, “Both.”

What caused him to turn to faith is probably complicated, but I know at least what he has said in his writings. A devastating divorce led him to seek the comfort and guidance of the Jewish faith. And then a second marriage to a devout Christian led him to explore her faith for her sake... only to find that he was pulled in by the Gospel news that God was in Christ for his sake... and the world’s.

As a good columnist, Brooks’ inner life works its way into his writings: his columns, articles, books and speeches. More and more he began to speak to topics such as virtues, character and ethics from a faith perspective.

Judging by the remarkable sale of his books and his demand as a speaker, Brooks is filling a void for people of faith who want to avoid the strident fundamentalism of the right and the strident social activism of the left in considering what it might mean as flawed people who have given up being perfect to live moral and good lives. Many of the ministers I hang with see Brooks becoming that public theologian that people look to for spiritual guidance, regardless of their political affiliation or ideology... the role people like Billy Graham, Reinhold Niebuhr and Henry Ward Beecher once filled.

In April of 2015, Brooks wrote a column for the *New York Times* that later was incorporated into his book, *The Second Mountain*—one of the books I read on my last sabbatical. The column was called, “The Moral Bucket List.”¹ Brooks began by saying that occasionally he comes across someone who seems to him to be “deeply good.” They are not trying to be that way, but there is something about how they listen to you, how they look after others’ needs, how their manner seems kind.” On the one hand, meeting such a person makes his day. On the other hand,

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/12/opinion/sunday/david-brooks-the-moral-bucket-list.html>



strangely, it causes him regret. It makes him want to achieve that same “generosity of spirit,” or “depth of character.”

In thinking about how maybe he could become more like them, it occurred to him that there are two sets of virtues: résumé virtues and eulogy virtues, and he has spent most of his life pursuing the former and neglecting the latter.

The résumé virtues are about those outward accomplishments that impress,
get you noticed,
get you in,
open doors
and influence others.

These accomplishments are not unimportant. We have to make a place for ourselves in this world, and to get things accomplished at work or in the community, you need to be credentialed, to be respected, to have some clout.

In fact, we are in a season of celebrating résumé virtues. It was not that long ago when most of this year’s high school seniors submitted applications to colleges where they listed their grade point average, participation in school activities and community service. Or if they are not going to college next year, they might already have put together a résumé to help them get a job.

These résumés are important. I’m quite pleased that our church has been a help in building some of them. I’m delighted that mission trips and mission service here in Roanoke, participation in our youth program, and an Eagle Scout project or two here at the church has been included in what our youth have wanted potential colleges or employers to see.

And of course, it doesn’t stop with college and first jobs. These résumé virtues are accumulated through the years in formal ways, such as what you see on LinkedIn, or in the things that are passed around about a person.

She owns the business.
He is an accomplished artist.
He once was a starting guard at UVA.
She chairs the board of a non-profit.
He has a +2 handicap.
She can play the guitar.
He can cook.
She can fix anything.

It is nice to have a good reputation in the community. But Brooks says that we can spend too much of our life adding to the list of résumé virtues and neglect building the virtues of the inner life.



Paul speaks to this in our passage. You can hear him list his own résumé virtues in what he wrote. He gives himself a good recommendation as an observant Jew.

He is circumcised;
he can trace his family roots back to Abraham,
 having descended from Abraham's son, Benjamin;
he lives up to the moral standards of being a Jew,
 has done the study to be looked up to as a Pharisee,
and was so zealous for his faith
 that he became a persecutor of those Jews who were following Jesus.

Now, in our time and context in Roanoke, VA we may not be impressed by this résumé, but if you really knew how hard it was to be respected as an observant Jew and learned Pharisee, you'd be impressed.

But Paul goes on to say that all these outer virtues mean nothing to him anymore. They are about what he can do, but now his life is completely about what Christ has done for him as a sinner in saving him by grace.

Now, I think there is a bit of hyperbole here. Paul's theology is not hyperbolic, but in terms of what is practical, he might be overstating a bit. First, achievements and honors can reflect internal character and virtue. Second, you don't get into college, get a job, or get access to funding by writing a letter saying, "I'm nothing. I count my achievements as trash. I'm just a sinner saved only by the grace of God."

But it is true—we've seen it—sometimes the development of inner virtues suffers as one tries to be impressive in the world. Becoming somebody in other people's eyes can become such an obsession that too little time is spent becoming the kind of person who doesn't need to feed off of other people's approval or admiration. Years can pass living for external achievement and validation while "the deepest parts of you go unexplored and unstructured."

I just went back to David Brooks by quoting him. Brooks built a tremendous résumé. He accomplished a lot for which I think he rightly should feel proud. Still, it is now important to him to let you know that gradually over the years he allowed a gap to grow between his "actual self" and "desired self;" between himself and being one of those incandescent souls he now wants to become.

To illustrate what he means, Brooks thought back to those memorial services of those through whom he thought shined the light of goodness. Some of them had impressive résumés and some did not. But their achievements or lack of them is not what was said about them by those who spoke: the rabbi, pastor, friend or family member. They did not moisten eyes talking about what was owned, or ran, or how much was made, or the stuff accumulated. The truest things that were said about the one remembered was who that person was as a friend or neighbor, a sibling, a role model, a parent or grandparent. He would hear about the acts of kindness, the good



examples they set, the sacrifices they made for the people and causes that mattered to them. There was always—*always*—a selflessness involved. And it was in the selflessness where their true selves were revealed.

Since I made the decision to preach this sermon called “Eulogy” early in the week, it was easy the rest of the week to hear examples of what Brooks is talking about. In the conversations I had with families preparing for those four memorial services, I heard what stories meant the most to loved ones. It was always about personal memories that revealed something that was essential about the one they lost, despite whatever other things could be said for good or ill about the one who had died.

- One was the owner of a chain of stores. His son’s friend wanted to talk about how he learned to ski by being held between that man’s knees.
- One was Miss Everything in High School. Her son talked about how he learned from her that the point of excelling was to serve, and that it is more important to affirm others than to seek praise yourself.
- One was a respected attorney. Her husband and son wanted to talk about her fierce loyalty to them, and how they knew that her deepest desire was that they be OK in life.
- One was a widely known dentist. His family spent most of their time with me telling the stories he told on himself so others could relax, laugh, and enjoy themselves.

Those are not the kind of things you’d find on most college applications or résumés, but they all hint at what Brooks was saying. In his best moments, he now cares more about what his children will say of him than what his eventual obituary in the New York Times will say. He wants the kind of things said of him that is said of mothers who truly show selfless and sacrificial love to their children.

Early in his faith journey, Brooks wrote a book called *The Road to Character*. In it, he told of flawed people of great character. His aim was to offer illustrations we can learn from so we can build those eulogy virtues.

Now he believes that the book was naïve. He was trying to make goodness yet another accomplishment, something else you can put on your résumé. He is now more in league with the Apostle Paul in saying that at the end of the day Eulogy Virtues come as gifts, and often they come with our being broken, defeated, humbled. Those who genuinely reflect goodness have been molded by life experiences, and he believes by God (even if they do not believe it), to realize that we can never become as good as we hope, but we can surrender so as to reflect the goodness given to us. It comes of finding that one is loved by others despite flaws and failures, and then having that love pull you toward wanting to be worthy of it. Paul’s way of putting it is to say that he failed in his attempts to become good, but he is more than happy to share the news about how he has come to know the forgiving and saving power of the resurrection.



With humility we can realize that what is ultimately good and wonderful in this world is about God and not about us. If we know that God can work something good even in our flawed hearts and lives, then we can find real purpose simply in seeking to reflect God's goodness to others for their sake. Whatever we do, it will be flawed, but maybe when we selflessly live so good can come to others, we will be able to share something far more valuable than what can be found in a résumé: the love of God.

