

## Building Character

Mark 9:14-25

October 23 2016

Ten days ago, when it finally started feeling like it wasn't summer anymore, I stuck my head in my son's bedroom and said, "hey, this weekend, I need you to take all the air conditioners out of the windows and put them back in the attic."

He said, "I'll do that right now, Mom!"

Okay, no, not exactly, it was more like "oh, geez" or words to that effect.

To which I responded, as I often do in moments like this,

"Hey! it builds character!"

My kids have had to hear this from me all their lives.

"Ugh -- can't believe we have a 7 a.m. practice again."

"Builds character!"

"Mom, no offense, this chicken is seriously burned."

"Builds character!"

This particular parental tic of mine came from my dad --

I don't know that he believes any more than I do that eating burned chicken really builds character,

but his mother, who was one tough lady, very definitely would have.

So my dad heard a whole lot of "builds character" when he was growing up, and tossed the phrase at me all the time,

and I've inflicted it on my kids.

Make your bed. Builds character.

I assume they'll be harassing their own children with it at some point.

This past month, I -- and a whole bunch of you, too --

read a book that's actually about building character,

and it has says it has nothing to do with eating bad food or early morning practice.

The book is by David Brooks, the Times columnist;

it's called 'The Road to Character', and it was our book discussion book this month.

And David Brooks is writing about what it means to have character, to build character.

The reason he wrote it, he says, is because [quote]

"About once a month I run across a person who radiates an inner light. These people can be in any walk of life. They seem deeply good. They listen well.

Their manner is infused with gratitude.

They are not thinking about what wonderful work they are doing.

They are not thinking about themselves at all.

When I meet such a person it brightens my whole day.

But I confess I often have a sadder thought:

It occurs to me that I've achieved a decent level of career success, but I have not achieved *that*. I have not achieved depth of character.

A few years ago I realized that I wanted to be a bit more like those people.

So I set out to discover how deeply good people get that way."

And so his book -- the road to character.

And it's really good. And you should read it.

But in case you don't get to it soon,

here's what's most important about what he says:

He says we all need help.

We all really need help.

Nobody becomes a good, good person all by themselves, he says,

Wonderful people are made, not born.

Brooks points out that we're awfully fond of saying things like

"be true to yourself" --

but actually your self may need a lot of help learning what's true and right.

We humans have a whole heck of a lot of good inside us,

but we have a lot of less-great stuff, too,

and we need help sorting out the one from the other.

Something that's a huge help is having good people to learn from. Brooks' book is full of the people he's inspired by, people you've heard of like Dwight D. Eisenhower, and people you've probably never heard of, like Frances Perkins, who threw herself into fighting for the rights of women laborers in the 20th century.

Each of us has our own heroes, the people who have moved us and inspired us -- and they may have lived 100 years ago, or it may be someone you run into all the time; whoever makes you say "I'd like to be more like that." That tough grandmother I mentioned earlier, she kinda scared the bejeezus out of me, but I'll tell you this -- she raised two amazing kids as a single mother in the 30's, fought her way into an inhospitable work world, had a passion for learning, and was unwaveringly honest. She is in my pantheon of moral exemplars.

But we don't learn anything from the good folks around us, we don't become better and truer ourselves if we don't *start* by saying:

"I am not the person I could be."

"I am not the person I want to be."

And that -- that's hard.

It's also a little countercultural these days.

Instead of saying "I love just the way you are" to the mirror, it's saying "I love you -- but we're still on a journey, you and I."

I like the way Brooks puts it:

this is a philosophy for stumblers.

For those who don't walk through life perfectly,

but who stumble not infrequently -- and truthfully that's all of us.

Stumblers, he says, face their imperfect nature with unvarnished honesty. Stumblers don't build their lives by being better than others, but just by being better than they *used* to be.

So David Brooks and his road to character leads me right into the scripture reading that you heard this morning, which is one of my favorites. Because it's a scripture for stumblers, which is to say a scripture for you and me and just about everybody.

It comes from Mark's Gospel, and it tells the story of a dad who comes to Jesus in desperation. His son is gravely ill, and he's heard that this guy Jesus is a healer, could maybe help his son.

And the truth is that this Dad doesn't entirely believe any of that, but he loves his son so much, he's willing to try anything.

So he comes to Jesus, and he tells the story, and says, with a tinge of hopelessness,

"If you can do anything, Jesus, if you can help, I'd appreciate it. A whole lot."

And Jesus says

"If? What do you mean, IF? All things are possible for the one who believes."

And the dad says -- and I swear, this might be the most honest human response that anyone in the bible says, anywhere --

he says

"I believe ... help my unbelief."

I believe - help my unbelief.

I'm on the way -- I am not quite there.

I wanna be your number one disciple, Jesus -- not happening yet.

And Jesus says, "well, come back when you're a true believer."

No, that's not what he says.  
Not what he says at all.  
Jesus heals the guy's son on the spot.  
"Help me" was good enough for him.

I love that story, because it IS a story for stumblers.  
It is a story for everyone who is on the road to character,  
on the road to being who they want to be.  
But is not there yet.  
I believe, says the dad, I'd like to believe more.  
Help me out with my unbelief.  
And what he receives then is pure grace,  
pure love,  
healing from the One who came to heal us all.

We are all, writes David Brooks,  
ultimately saved by grace.  
You admit your need, and surrender your crown, and open up a space for  
others to fill, and grace floods in.

Out in Colorado, there's a Lutheran pastor  
who is fast becoming one of my new heroes and exemplars,  
though I suspect she might well be horrified by that.  
Her name is Nadia Bolz-Weber,  
and she is an ordained Evangelical Lutheran clergy woman,  
and she is 6'1" and has a butch haircut and sleeve tattoos,  
and she wouldn't be here if it wasn't for the friends in AA who pulled her out of a  
very dark place of addiction.  
And her church in Denver is called The House for All Sinners and Saints.  
And everyone is welcome there.  
Really, really everyone, as it should be.  
And her message is that, you know, we're all kind of a mess,  
and we're all trying to get ourselves better.

My job, she says, my job is to remind people that all of their mess-ups are not more powerful than God's mercy. We come together, she says, because church is where we are reminded who we are and that God's grace is actually so much more powerful than our ability to make mistakes. And then we go out to try again.

The road to character is a road for stumblers. A road for all of us who are willing to say we're not there yet, we're not quite the people we hope to be, but we're working on it. It's a road on which our guides are the people whose lives we are inspired by, the people we know who have some quality that we want to have, too. It's a road where we can cry out to God "I believe, help my unbelief" and God says you're mine and by grace I love you, and we'll work on this next part together.

It's a road we're all on, if we're honest with ourselves -- a road towards being someone, something, better than we are now.

I want to close, perhaps unusually, by sharing with you words from two funerals, two funerals I led just last week. In the end, David Brooks says, very powerfully, that the virtues of character that we should all strive for are not the resume virtues, but the *eulogy* virtues. The resume virtues, he says, are the ones you list on a resume, the skills you have, the schools you went to, the awards you've won. But eulogy virtues are deeper: they are what get talked about at your funeral, the ones that exist at the core of your being

And those are the qualities that we seek on the road to character.

And last week I had the privilege of honoring the lives of two people who left this place better for their having been in it, whose lives serve as a reminder of what we try to be. When David Brooks speaks of the eulogy virtues, it is lives such as these that he is speaking of.

Ten days ago, on Jennings Beach, a couple hundred people gathered in a misty rain, some who had brought their dogs along, and that was fitting -- because they were the grieving friends of John Mancinelli, who had worked for over two decades at Earth Animal, Sue and Bob Goldstein's shop for animal care. Johnny knew everyone who came through the door, and he knew their pets; he knew each kid, and he exuded love and welcome and immense care. And so they were there, the moms and the dads and the kids and the pets, they were gathered in a circle on the beach to listen as we prayed our prayers of thanks and spoke of him. And Graham Nielsen, our Graham, seventh grader, came forward to the microphone, and gave a simple eulogy, his voice filled with sorrow: "You always made me feel special, John," he said. You made me feel important, like I was okay just the way I am."

It is no small thing to have lived a life that made room for a thirteen-year-old boy to feel to feel understood.

Two days later, in this old sanctuary, hundreds gathered to grieve and give thanks for Linda Ducruet. And her daughter Christina stood before us all to offer her eulogy; and painted a portrait of her mother in words of stunning beauty.

I'll share just a glimpse:

*Mom's was a graceful brilliance, she said.... brilliant in the sense of bright and luminous. ...*

*On top of her intellect, my mom had a backbone.*

*A voice. Integrity.*

*She expressed her true self with sincerity and tenacity.*

*Mom could deeply understand people's needs and her impulse to opine or advise—sometimes without being asked to—was a gift to us all.*

*Even in the hard months of this summer, all it took for mom to open up was a request for help.*

*Suddenly, she was alive and direct with laser-like wisdom.*

Christina's closing words were these:

*I heard the song my mother sang to life and I will keep singing it until I too, have to go.*

We who there listening heard the echo of that song ourselves, and left this sanctuary wanting, ourselves, to sing like Linda.

The road to character begins at that point when we say

"I want to be one who sings a song to life,

I want to be remembered like that" --

The road to character begins when we say "I believe, help my unbelief,"

"I love, help my unlove,"

"I care, help my uncaring."

The road to character is what we stumble along together,

starting right here in this house for all sinners and saints,

where we are all more than a little bit of both.

On the road to character,

we receive grace in the midst of our mistakes,

given generously by a loving God --

who loves us we are

and reminds us what we can be.

So -- onwards.



Amen.