

Parallel Paths: This Is What Faith Looks Like in Public
Matthew 22:15-22

In that little video you saw this morning, the one that will welcome new people to our website [www.campbellunited.org/about], I said, “We look for signs of grace in the world and we point them out to one another.” I hope that’s true. I hope this is a community where we practice with one another lifting our eyes up from our own lives, and all the things that demand our immediate attention. I hope we will always be looking out, seeing not just the next footsteps on our own path, but the landscape off the path. That we will be focused not just on the next spots where our feet need to step, but all the ways the earth is permeated with holiness.

Since September of last year, all our Sundays—and particularly my sermons—have had some reference to Brian McLaren’s book *We Make the Road by Walking*. I haven’t quoted Brian every week, but I’ve been following his lead through parts of the biblical story. Each of those stories has, I think, opened up a new stretch of road and connected it with what has come before. We’ve been re-tracing the path left by Jesus and his followers who have come before us—a path toward wholeness, the fullness of life that God hopes for us. We’ve been clearing out new walkways through the underbrush, and sometimes jungle, that make up the landscape of our own lives—in this place, twenty-one centuries after Jesus lived.

When David Brooks book *The Road to Character* came out a few months ago, it seemed to me like a remarkably similar conversation to the one we’d been having. Here was someone who also saw—from a non-religious perspective—that each of us is on a path. The stories of our lives, he too says, are scripts that we’re writing as we are walking—growing—in a direction we have consciously or unconsciously chosen for ourselves. Because he was not writing about faith, Brooks called his destination *character*, something that sounds like a worthy goal to just about everyone. But he tells stories that in some ways are very much like the Bible’s stories, of people who have been transformed as they committed themselves to becoming the kind of person they wanted to be, serving the purposes they felt called to serve. Sometimes learning from moments when they fell down hard, or working around their own weaknesses and flaws. People like Dorothy Day, the Catholic laywoman whose devotion to living alongside of the poor, whose inexhaustible energy for offering people food and home and community, allowed her—helped her—overcome a really terrible personal history. Brooks tells the story of President Dwight Eisenhower, who disciplined himself out of a lifelong tendency toward uncontrollable anger before he could succeed in a life of public service. Brooks’ point, really, is that people of character live consciously and intentionally; they work to shape themselves for a life of meaning and holiness, because our culture, and sometimes even the personality we were born with, will not lead us naturally in that direction.

What I noticed most as I read David Brooks’ book is that the “character” he talks about as the mark of a good life sounds a lot like the life of self-giving and humility and purpose that Jesus called people to. Now not every person of character is a follower of Jesus. I don’t want to water down the name “Christian” until we use it to describe every nice person or every good citizen. And I’m not suggesting that Jesus created a path that’s wide enough to hold every good intention

and every idea about what creates a meaningful life. But what if we could see *many* different roads—to God, to character, to spiritual maturity and human wholeness—as *parallel* paths, roads that lead in a similar direction? Maybe the truth is that Christians share with people of other faiths, and sometimes with people of *no faith*, a commitment to building a world of compassion and justice, a world that looks like God’s kingdom on earth and inside of us. We can be walking in the same direction even when our eyes are not fixed on the same object. Maybe the landscape along *other* roads can also reveal to us signs of grace, glimpses of God in places we had not thought to look before. Maybe the people walking on a parallel path can teach us something we need to know for our own walk.

So for these weeks of summer, I want to examine the lives of some people who I think might be walking on parallel paths to ours. Each of the people I’ve chosen is a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize—not because only famous people of great accomplishment can be models for us, but because we can see God’s purposes, Jesus’ values, in their work for justice and peace and compassion. Teresa of Avila, a saint who lived centuries ago, said, if you want to know God, then spend time with the friends of God. And that is what I hope we will do today and in the weeks to come: spend some time with people who are accomplishing God’s purposes...because maybe their lives will reveal to us something new about who God is and all the ways God shows up in the world.

This weekend we celebrate the birth of the United States, and so we begin with an American: Jimmy Carter. Jimmy Carter was the 39th president of this country. By most measures, his presidency was not very successful. He served just one term; when he ran for re-election he lost.

I can’t imagine how that moment felt. It takes a tremendous amount of ego to even run for President. Carter himself has said, “There’s always an element of self-delusion among people who believe they ought to be President. There’s an...overestimation of your own abilities.” Wouldn’t there have to be? I wonder what it felt like to be Jimmy Carter on the day after an election in which a whole country-ful of people said, “We’ve been watching you for the past four years, and we don’t want you to lead us any more.” I can’t imagine the humiliation of that moment, the temptation to retire into comfort and obscurity, a small life, with people you know will appreciate you. But Jimmy Carter didn’t. When someone asked him about this, he said, “I feel like I have a certain amount of talent and ability, and one life to live, and I don’t want to waste it. I’d like it to be meaningful to myself and the people around me.” To another reporter, he said, “I have one life and one chance to make it count for something. I am free to choose what that something is, and the something I’ve chosen is my faith...My faith demands—this is not optional—my faith demands that I do whatever I can, wherever I am, whenever I can, for as long as I can with whatever I have, to try to make a difference.”

Carter’s life of public service was not over. Instead of having a library built to house his papers and polish his image, as many former presidents have done, Jimmy Carter put his money and efforts into establishing the Carter Center in Atlanta. It’s a working center; its staff and volunteers go all over the world to help resolve conflict, protect human rights and prevent disease. Since 1980, former President Jimmy Carter has mediated conflicts in Ethiopia and Eritrea, North Korea, Liberia, Haiti, Sudan and Uganda. The Carter Center has sent delegations to monitor the fairness of elections in 90 countries. Jimmy and Rosalyn Carter volunteer one week every year with Habitat for Humanity; their connection with that organization has helped make it one of the most successful non-profit organizations in the world.

President Carter won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002, for the work he did *after* he was no longer president.

Jimmy Carter turned 90 last fall. This year, he's been working in Africa on eliminating death from guinea worm disease.

Before, during and after his presidency, Carter was never shy about his own faith. He speaks in public, clearly and honestly, about the ways his faith has influenced him. He talked sort of famously about his own struggles as a Christian—some of you will remember a sort of ill-advised interview in which he admitted that he “lusted in his heart” frequently.

But as conscious as he was of his own faith, Carter knew he was leading a nation of people from many backgrounds, not just Christians. As president, he was careful never to promote his faith over other religions. Once when a reporter from a religious magazine asked him whether he thought more Christians should run for public office, he answered, “The finest teachings of Mohammed, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Protestantism or Catholicism [all] advocate peace and sharing one's good fortune with those less fortunate. Democracy and freedom are not dependent on Christian beliefs...Other believers promote similar principles in secular life. [All of these beliefs promote] peace, alleviation of suffering, and justice.”

Maybe it's humility that has allowed Jimmy Carter to do so much good all over the world, to collaborate with others who lead from very different points of view. His public life reminds me of the story of Jesus we read this morning. Jesus too lived in a place and time where, just like here, faith and citizenship were not the same thing. Some people thought they could flummox Jesus into admitting a conflict in his loyalties. “What do you think?” they asked him. “Is it really possible to live in this ‘kingdom of God’ you keep talking about while we live in the Roman Empire? Are we supposed to pay taxes to an emperor who doesn't even believe in God?”

But Jesus refused to be distracted. “Look at that coin in your hand,” he said. “Whose image is on it?” The emperor's, clearly. “Then go ahead and give those coins back to Caesar; it looks to me like they belong to him,” Jesus said. “But whose image is stamped on you, and me, and each of us? Whose image do *people* bear?” Jesus was calling them back to the story of creation, the story of Adam and Eve that they had heard since they were children. Each of us—every person—is created in the image of God, he was reminding them. Let government claim the things it has created, Jesus said. But you—you and every other human being, no matter where they live or where they came from or who rules over them—you bear the image of the God who created you. You belong to no one but God.

Little God-people everywhere, each one reflecting some spark of God's love and creativity...no matter which path they're walking on. Holiness all around us. Don't forget to look up.

Today's Centering Prayer

Almighty God, you who are mother and father to us all,
Look upon your plant Earth divided.
May we know that we are all your children,
And that all nations belong to one great family,
That all of our religions lead to you.
Multiply our prayers for peace,
until the whole Earth becomes your congregation,
united in your love.
Strengthen our vision of peaceful future
And give us strength to work unceasingly
to make that vision real.
Amen