



“Even More Than I Say”

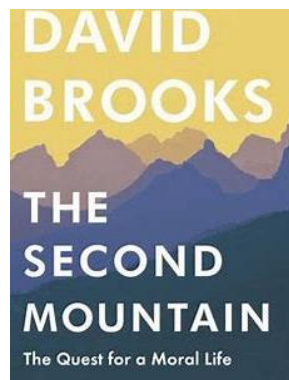
Rev. Jody Andrade

Philemon 1: 1-21

September 8, 2019

“Every once in a while, I meet a person who radiates joy.”¹

Those are the opening words to commentator David Brooks’ latest book, [The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life](#). Brooks writes that most people encounter two mountains during their lives. We begin climbing our first mountain as we begin adulthood. To get to the top we work hard and embrace what will help us climb: power at work and home. When we get to the top, we hope to find happiness that comes from material wealth and success in the eyes of others.



And after some time, we recognize that though we’re at the top, we aren’t happy after all. At this point we find ourselves in existential crisis. We are going through a difficult time and realize we have no real friends, no moral depth, no purpose, nothing about which we care deeply. We’ve descended

¹ David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life*. (Random House, 2019), xi.

into a valley. As Psalm 23 says, we *walk in the valley of the shadow of death*. And then, if we're lucky, we look up and notice the second mountain. We begin climbing up, heading toward a place of meaning. To help us with that climb we embrace authenticity, forge relationships based on sacrifice, and put all that we have into doing something worthwhile. At the top of the second mountain we find more than happiness: there is joy. Brooks explains the difference between the mountains: "If the first mountain is elitist—moving up—the second mountain is egalitarian—planting yourself amid those who need and walking arm in arm with them."²

At Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church, we are, together as one body, climbing that second mountain. We encourage vulnerability so we can embrace authenticity. We practice radical hospitality so we may forge relationships based on sacrifice. We put all that we have in following Christ. We climb not to please a demanding God, but because of the joy God offers to us as we do the work of climbing.

In our mid-twenties, my husband and I joined another couple for vacation. We stayed at our friend's family home for a long weekend on Cape Cod. It was great fun that first day: the weather was beautiful, the seafood was fresh and we were having a ball with our friends. The second evening after a dinner at home, those of us in the younger generation went into town to meet some friends. We rolled back home fairly late and our group decided to make scrambled eggs and bacon before we tucked in for the night. We did not do this quietly. We were laughing and cooking in the kitchen, not really concerned about waking the parents who were sleeping on the other side of the house. We thought we were keeping the noise at a respectable level.

We were wrong.

Eventually, the giant, blustery, barrel-chested, former NFL-playing father of the house came to the top of the stairs in his boxers and robe and roared

² Ibid, xvi.

down at us: “I’m coming down there! And when I do, I promise you...HEADS WILL ROLL!”

He scared us so much that we tip-toed up to our room, gathered our things, loaded the car, put the gear shift in neutral and pushed the car silently out of the driveway, leaving under the cloak of darkness so as to escape the father’s mighty wrath.

It’s not hard to picture God, the creator who chastised us in last week’s 2nd chapter of Jeremiah scripture, as a giant, barrel-chested cranky father shouting down at us, “When I come down there, HEADS WILL ROLL!” And for that angry God we will work hard and sacrifice to make GOD happy. We will behave *or else*.

And yet the Bethlehem story tells us of how the world received God’s own self Jesus the Christ, as a helpless newborn baby. He came not to be the awesome conquering Messiah that the world expected, but to be the lamb, to submit, to love his enemies.³

Christ banished the “you better behave or else” expectation. He turned the power dynamic on its head. The weak shall conquer; grace and mercy will rule the day. He calls us to that Second Mountain. In his letter to Philemon, Paul, as a follower of Christ, is embracing this new world order. He’s proposing the outrageous idea that Onesimus, the slave, be treated as brother.

Gone is life as we have known it: using up every resource at our disposal. Paul is inviting Philemon to a new way of living, where you give away something— a position of power, your need to be “right.” You give away your time and your material goods, all as a response to the love of Christ.

And in the giving comes joy.

³ Ibid, paraphrase from 219.

That's an upside down way of thinking. Society teaches us that when we get things, we get joy. Christ says just the opposite: it is only when we give ourselves away that we can live fully.

If you're thinking, *But I do give! I do what I'm told!* hear this: there is no joy in reluctance or compulsion. Joy comes from commitment. The Apostle Paul understood that real joy comes from **freely** giving of self. He knows he can insist Philemon obey him, but chooses to write: "[B]ut I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced."

After boldly asking Philemon to accept slave as brother, Paul goes one step further. Verse 18: "If Onesimus has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account." With these words, Paul shows he has embraced Onesimus fully: he claims Onesimus as family. Paul makes Onesimus' debts *Paul's own* responsibility. That's real relationship, when sacrifice for the other is a way of life. The early Christians were heavily persecuted, and it was only through this essential understanding of community, of mutual sacrifice and responsibility, that they were able to survive.

Paul writes, "I am sending [Onesimus], that is, my own heart, back to you." That, too, is authentic relationship. When I am able to give *so that you may be made whole in some way*, I experience deep, abiding joy. Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said giving defines relationship: *giving is the primary relationship* between one person and another.⁴ David Brooks writes, "Individualism says, *The main activities of life are buying and selling*. But you say, *No, the main activity of life is giving*. Human beings at their best are givers of gifts.⁵ Brooks then broadens this truth: "Community is woven through love-

⁴ Ibid, 71.

⁵ Ibid, 53.

drenched accountability.”⁶ In relationship, we belong to, and are responsible for, one another.

Hey Preacher, I know where you're headed. What do you want from me? What does this church want from me?

At a local non-denominational local church, members submit their IRS tax forms to prove they are giving the expected amount. They literally hand in their government forms to prove they are donating what is required of them by the church.

There is no joy in reluctance or compulsion. Joy comes from commitment.

If you are a member of Beth Tikvah Temple in Roswell, you receive an annual bill for your membership. The amount you pay is calculated from your life circumstance: if you are a single working person, you pay the temple “X”; if you are a family with four dependents and a double income, you pay the temple “Y.” While I’m sure the theology of supporting the temple is taught along with sending out the annual statements, this is a very different way of doing things than here at Pleasant Hill Presbyterian.

There is no joy in reluctance or compulsion. Joy comes from commitment. You ask what this church wants from you? This church wants you to commit to joy.

Let me show you a photo of joy that comes from commitment. When we call Bernie to ask if he could *please possibly consider finding* time in his schedule to *maybe think about* going with the college kids to Montreat in January, his response is, “I’d love to!” Bernie Kida is the unofficial official cook for all Youth trips to Montreat. He preps homemade barbeque before the journey, brings cooler upon cooler filled with goodies, assigns kitchen duty to the young people and then commences with his ministry of cuisine and caring. Chandler Thurlow and Walter Kahrs can flip pancakes like professionals because of

⁶ Ibid, 73.

Bernie. Courtney Henry is practically a sous chef. You haven't lived until you've seen the brilliance of Michael Armstrong on dish duty.

Bernie's red apron holds some interesting messages. Courtney Henry: "Bernie, thanks for everything you do for all of us at Montreat. Your teaching will live on forever." Duncan LeBlonde agrees: "Bernie, you're the coolest dude ever to cook me a slider. I hope you never "slide" out of my life." Bernie coaches, cleans, cajoles and cares. He gives of himself, his time, talent and treasure, and has built authentic relationship with some of the best folks at PHPC. Bernie knows the joy of commitment. He has the signatures to prove it.



Every church member will receive a letter and pledge card in the mail this week. Read it carefully. Consider the joy you find in committing to Christ's work through this church. Pray about how deeply you can give in 2020.

And then respond. Tell your leadership how big we can dream as we plan next year's ministry together. Know that in committing through a financial pledge, joy will come to you. How much joy? How deeply will you commit? I pray that, as Paul wrote, it will be "even more than I say."

Amen.