

**April 21, 2024**  
**Sermon Manuscript**

**John 10:11-16**

<sup>11</sup> (Jesus said,) “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. <sup>12</sup> The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. <sup>13</sup> The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

<sup>14</sup> “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— <sup>15</sup> just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. <sup>16</sup> I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.”

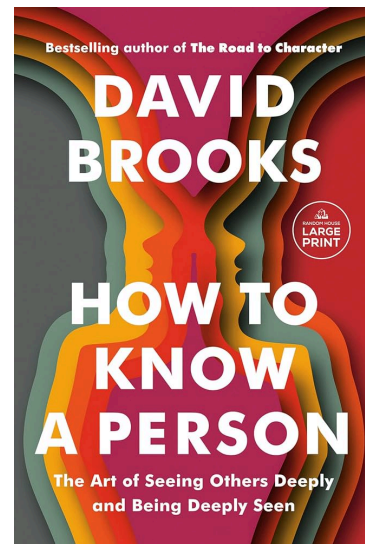
Seeing People Deeply: The Art of Conversationalism

Well, you may have noticed another book cover printed in your bulletin this week. Although, I’m not going to read a book to you again, like last week. But we may be continuing last week’s trend of topics you don’t usually hear a sermon on, because I’m really excited to find someone who addresses a subject I’ve longed to find some insight on for quite awhile: and that is how to love people through interpersonal conversations. We all have conversations - social interactions - with people all the time. And I know many of you are like me and desire to have a loving and christlike presence with people we have conversations with. But it’s one thing to want to do that; it’s another thing to *know how* to do it! Because sometimes conversations are hard. I mean, have you ever been in conversation with someone who you want to love and have a positive interaction with, but you just don’t know how? You don’t know what to say? I’ve found myself feeling that way more times than I can count!

So today I want to draw on some of the insights from this book by David Brooks in connection with this good news: that as Jesus - our good shepherd - sees & knows us deeply, and lived the most fulfilled life loving people this way He invites us also to be blessed - and be a blessing - by learning to connect more deeply with others.

Some of you may be familiar with Brooks’ work as an opinion columnist for The New York Times, a commentator for The Atlantic Magazine, and a political pundit for PBS. Although, probably less of you are aware that in recent years he has become a Christ-follower despite having a Jewish background.<sup>1</sup> And his book covers many things I won’t even touch on, but the angle I want to focus on this morning concerns the first half of his book’s subtitle: about the art of seeing people deeply.

I would imagine that all of us know what a blessing it is to feel truly seen by another human being: to feel valued, heard, and understood. I mean, honestly: is there anything better? Brooks notes that **recognition** - to be recognized - is actually the first human quest, as “babies come out of the womb (they look) for a face that will see them, a mother or a caretaker who will know them and attend to their needs...Every child, even from birth, is looking for answers to the basic questions of life: Am I safe? ... Am I worthy? Will I be cared for?” And on Good Shepherd Sunday we celebrate that Jesus sees and knows us not just deeply, but perfectly. As He says to us in verse 14 of our Gospel reading today: “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep” (John 10). And if seeing us - that is, valuing us, hearing us, understanding us - if this is foundational to how Jesus loves us, then it makes sense that this would be



<sup>1</sup> Watch Brooks talk about his conversion here: <https://youtu.be/SK0zLTjo79k?feature=shared> also viewable at [www.saintmatthiasoakdale.com/supplement](http://www.saintmatthiasoakdale.com/supplement) A second video on Brooks’ conversion is this interview: <https://youtu.be/nkpY8YZMpx0?si=R6RuwlIoK1W08jRk> although he also gets into politics here.

foundational to how we can love other people. And not just that, but if in doing this Jesus was the most fulfilled human ever, then it makes sense that we would not only bless others by making them feel seen, but *we ourselves* will be blessed to the extent that we are able to really see others deeply, just as Jesus is blessed to see you and me. We may have all sorts of negative interactions with human beings in this life, but to truly see another as the unique representation of the image of God that we are is really quite delightful?

The good news is that as Jesus sees & knows us deeply, and lived the most fulfilled life loving people this way, He invites us also to be blessed - and be a blessing - by learning to connect more deeply with others. We may not have thought about it quite this way before, but I would suggest that learning to see people more deeply is what becoming more like Christ looks like, which is a lifelong and never-ending journey for us all.

An insight I really appreciate from this book is that Brooks suggests that character has a much more *social* element than many have tended to imagine. You see, a dominant understanding of character that has come down to us through the ages is all about the individual, where morality is thought to be “mostly about abstract universal principles, or even about making big moral decisions during climactic moments: Do I report fraud when I see it at work?” But Brooks frames character as instead being “about how (we) pay attention to others.”<sup>2</sup> He writes that moral behavior happens continuously throughout our days, even during the seemingly uneventful and everyday moments. And that the essential immoral act is the inability to see other people correctly,” which begins to ring true as we consider that “evil happens when people are unseeing, when they don’t recognize the personhood in other human beings.” #

But I said that today I wanted to focus on how we can grow in our capacity to see others deeply in our interpersonal conversations. Certainly if we became more empathetic that would go a long way - and I may get into that if I do a part two to this sermon - but today I want to keep it very practical. Because, again, maybe it’s just me, but I think that for many the problem is not whether we *desire* to love others - for them to feel seen - I think we often just lack the know-how, the skills to do it. But if that’s not the case for you, I do apologize: I guess today you’ll get to listen to me process how to get better at this.

However, the statistics indicate that most people are not as good at *seeing others* as they may think. A scholar named William Ickes studied “how accurate people are at perceiving what other people are thinking (found) that strangers (in a) first conversation read each other accurately only about 20 percent of the time and close friends and family members do so only 35 percent of the time.” And “intriguingly, Ickes finds that the longer many couples are married, the less accurate they are at reading each other.” Thus, “we all go through our days awash in (a fair bit of) social ignorance.”

Moreover, there are many people who do not feel seen by anyone! “In one survey, 54 percent of Americans reported that no one knows them well.” And the percentage of Americans who said they have no close friends has quadrupled over the past three decades.<sup>3</sup> Of course, social media hasn’t helped this, as it gives the illusion of social contact without requiring anyone to “perform the gestures that

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<sup>2</sup> This, of course, would still impact whether we report fraud at work, but for reasons of what’s best for people instead of an abstract principle.

<sup>3</sup> Between 1990 and 2020

actually build trust, care, and affection”;<sup>4</sup> skills like being able to engage small talk (where more is going on than meets the eye, by the way),<sup>5</sup> but also<sup>6</sup>

- being a good listener;
- knowing how to end a conversation gracefully;
- and knowing how to see things from another’s point of view

Well, the good news is that as Jesus sees & knows us deeply, and lived the most fulfilled life loving people this way, He invites us also to be blessed - and be a blessing - by *learning* to connect more deeply with others.

So when we think about how we might engage others in such a way that they feel seen, ***we’re*** talking about being a good conversationalist. And while some folks think a good conversationalist is someone who can tell funny stories<sup>7</sup> and others think it is someone who can offer piercing insights on a range of topics,<sup>8</sup> this is mistaken.<sup>9</sup> Brooks suggests a good conversationalist is someone who has a persistent curiosity about other people<sup>10</sup> and is capable of leading others on a journey toward mutual understanding.<sup>11</sup> Brooks writes,

“A good conversation is not a group of people making a series of statements at each other. (In fact, that’s a bad conversation.) A good conversation is an act of joint exploration. Somebody floats a half-formed idea. Somebody else seizes on the nub of the idea, plays with it, offers her own perspective based on her own memories, and floats it back so the other person can respond. A good conversation sparks you to have thoughts you never had before. A good conversation starts in one place and ends up in another.”

And what are some hindrances to engaging in good conversation? Well, on the list on your insert you’ll see that Brooks says the top reason is our egotism, that sin has just made us too self-centered to try. And then the second biggest hindrance is anxiety: when we have so much noise in our own heads that we can’t hear what’s going on in other heads. But there a few other hindrances that might also be factors.

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<sup>4</sup> Brooks argues that social media replaces intimacy with stimulation.

<sup>5</sup> Brooks writes, “Through small talk and doing mundane stuff together your unconscious mind is moving with mine and we’re getting a sense of each other’s energy, temperament, and manner. Small talk and just casually being around someone is a vastly underappreciated stage in the process of getting to know someone. Sometimes you can learn more about a person by watching how they talk to a waiter than by asking some profound question about their philosophy of life.”

<sup>6</sup> The following list is offered by Brooks.

<sup>7</sup> Brooks says, “That’s a raconteur, but it’s not a conversationalist.”

<sup>8</sup> Brooks says, “That’s a lecturer, but not a conversationalist.”

<sup>9</sup> We may not have ever thought of it, but we can assume that Jesus was an excellent conversationalist at the many dinner parties He attended, but it wouldn’t have been for these reasons.

<sup>10</sup> Brooks writes, “I’ve had to make a resolution: If you call me up or invite me for coffee and then talk at me with not even a single molecule’s worth of interest in what I might be thinking, we will not be enjoying each other’s company again.”

<sup>11</sup> Brooks: “A good conversation is not a group of people making a series of statements at each other. (In fact, that’s a bad conversation.) A good conversation is an act of joint exploration.”

- One is known as the lesser-minds problem. Because we “just have access to the tiny portion they speak out loud,” this leads us to the misperception that we are much deeper and interesting than other we talk to.
- ~~Another is naive realism. This is the way the world appears to us is the objective view and therefore everyone else must see the same reality I do.~~
- ~~Another issue is essentialism, where we use stereotypes to categorize vast swaths of people. We tend to do this a lot with politics: “If this person voted for Joe Biden, they must be like X.” Or “if this person supported Donald Trump, they must be like Y.” And we jump to all of these assumptions about what a person is like, which stifles our curiosity to really find out.~~
- And a final hindrance is the static mindset: where we never update our models for who a person is. I’m sure we’ve all experienced this with childhood friends or with a family member who decided who we were decades ago and seem to always engage us through that lens.

Now, I apologize if this feels awkward for me to talk about - I promise I’m not trying to make fellowship hour today into the most self-conscious experience of your life - but if we want to get better at engaging others in a way that they feel seen, the two main ways we do this concern the quality of our responsiveness to them and the sort of questions we ask.

When it comes to the way we respond to others, whether we value and respect and care for someone is first of all going to be communicated with our gaze and body language before it’s conveyed by any words. But beyond that, here are a few nonobvious ways we can become a better conversationalist that Brooks offers.<sup>12</sup>

1. One is to treat attention as an on/off switch, not a dimmer. All of us have been in a conversation with someone where we’ve noticed they aren’t really listening to us. But to give some compassion to them and to ourselves - cuz we all do this - apparently “the problem is that the average person speaks at the rate of about 120 to 150 words a minute, (and this) is not nearly enough data to occupy the brain of (a listener).” Our brains have too much horsepower! But Brooks offers a solution to “treat attention as all or nothing”, which

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<sup>12</sup> Some other characteristics of a good conversationalist that I have not listed include:

BE A LOUD LISTENER.

When you are listening, you are like the host of a dinner party. You have set the scene. You’re exuding warmth toward your guests, showing how happy you are to be with them, drawing them closer to where they want to go. When you are speaking, you are like a guest at a dinner party. You are bringing gifts.

DON’T FEAR THE PAUSE - In some conversations, it’s fun when everything is rapid-fire. People are telling funny stories or completing each other’s sentences. But other times, somebody says something important that requires reflection. ...because speaking and listening involve many of the same brain areas, so once you go into response mode, your ability to listen deteriorates. ...a good conversationalist controls her impatience and listens to learn, rather than to respond... In her book, Murphy notes that Japanese culture encourages people to pause and reflect before replying. A study of Japanese businesspeople found that they are typically comfortable with eight-second pauses between one comment and another, roughly twice as long as Americans generally tolerate. They’re wise to take that pause.

THE MIDWIFE MODEL - some good conversations are, by necessity, lopsided. In conversation, a midwife is there not to lead with insights but to receive and build on the insights the other person is developing. The midwife is there to make the person feel safe, but she is also there to prod. There are always ways we’re not fully honest with ourselves. The midwife is there to encourage a deeper honesty.

KEEP THE GEM STATEMENT AT THE CENTER - This is the truth underneath the disagreement, something you both agree on: “Even when we can’t agree on Dad’s medical care, I’ve never doubted your good intentions. I know we both want the best for him.” If you can both return to the gem statement during a conflict, you can keep the relationship between you strong.

FIND THE DISAGREEMENT UNDER THE DISAGREEMENT - When you search for the disagreement under the disagreement, you are looking for the moral, philosophical roots of why you each believe what you do. You’re engaged in a mutual exploration. Suddenly, instead of just repeating our arguments, we’re pulling stories out of each other. As the neuroscientist Lisa Feldman Barrett puts it, “Being curious about your friend’s experience is more important than being right.”

can be aided by engage our bodies with the SLANT method: sit up, lean forward, ask questions, nod your head, track the speaker. Listen with your eyes. That's paying attention 100 percent. And I guess if we find we're not up for that, maybe that's where knowing how to end a conversation gracefully becomes something to practice.<sup>13</sup>

2. Another tip that surprised me is to favor familiarity. Brooks says that while we "might think that people love to hear and talk about things that are new and unfamiliar. In fact, people love to talk about... what they know... the movie they have already seen, the game they already watched."<sup>14</sup>
3. Then, a third characteristic of good conversationalists is they make people authors, not witnesses. So, they ask for stories about specific events or experiences, but then they go even further to want to know how you experienced what happened or even how you're experiencing now what you experienced then.
4. A fourth characteristic is don't be a topper. Comedian Brian Regan has this bit<sup>15</sup> about how people are always trying to top one another with their stories. He said he has this fantasy that he was one of the twelve astronauts who have been on the moon, because then he would be able to top anyone's story whenever he wants. No matter what someone says, he could just say, "Oh, interesting... I've walked on the moon." But while trading stories that one-up each other might feel fun, as long as you have a story that can't be topped, if we "want to build a shared connection" with someone Brooks suggests we try sitting with their experience before we start ladling out our own.
5. And a final one I'll share from Brooks' characteristics of a good conversationalist is what he calls do the looping. This is when you repeat what someone just said in order to make sure you grasp what they're getting at. This is helpful for seeing people deeply because people tend to believe they are much more transparent and clear in what they say than they really are. Although, we don't want to sound like a therapist and say, all formally, "So this is what I hear you saying..." It's better to do it less formally as a paraphrase of what was just said, like saying "So you're really ticked off at your brother, huh?" And then they agree or they know to clarify if that's not really what they're getting at. And either way they feel heard.

Now, let me acknowledge: this is a lot to take in. *No one* is going to remember to do all of this in one conversation, and if you try to you're just going to be paralyzed. So a better approach that I've been trying is just to practice being intentional about one of these that we don't tend to do. So hang onto the list from your bulletin or to this sermon manuscript and before that phone call with your sister just look for an opportunity to "do the looping" a few times in response to things she shares, and see what that does for the quality of connection. The good news is that as Jesus sees & knows us deeply, and lived the most fulfilled life loving people this way, He invites us also to be blessed - and be a blessing - by learning to connect more deeply with others.

But having talked about our responsiveness, the other way we might become better at engaging people in a way that they feel more seen depends upon the questions we ask. Though this, of course,

<sup>13</sup> My instinct is that people-pleasing can be a real hindrance to honing our skills in ending conversations graciously, but I wish Brooks would've said more about how to do this.

<sup>14</sup> Brooks, "If they're wearing a T-shirt from their kid's sports team, ask about that. If they've got a nice motorcycle, lead with a question about it."

<sup>15</sup> Watch here, it's hilarious: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qBJ6yptGqm4>  
His full one-hour set is here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UQYeZs9DILE>  
Both links are viewable at [www.saintmatthiasoakdale.com/supplement](http://www.saintmatthiasoakdale.com/supplement)

assumes we're asking questions at all! I think there can be a lot of hesitation with asking questions in conversation, but I think Brooks is right when he suggests that asking questions is actually a moral practice(!). He explains that when we ask a good question, we're adopting a posture of humility. We're confessing that we don't know and we want to learn; and we're also honoring the person. And if we have a sense that asking questions is somehow too invasive, that *is* a legitimate concern. But people are probably more eager to talk about themselves than you think. "A 2012 Harvard study by Harvard neuroscientists found that people often took more pleasure from sharing information about themselves than from receiving money."

Perhaps what *can* feel invasive or make people feel put-on-the-spot is when we stick to asking factual questions like we're gathering info for a news report. "What neighborhood do you live in? What do you do?" Brooks says the problem with asking questions like these is that they "don't involve a surrender of power" - they lack any humility! - and can give the person being asked the sense that they're going to be evaluated or judged based on what they answer.

Of course, a broad, 'dumb' question communicates more humility than one that is meant to display how well-informed we are about something. But Brooks also suggests that while we may be in the habit of greeting people by saying "How's it going?" or "What's up?", these questions are often too vague to trigger great conversation.<sup>16</sup>

But the best type of questions, according to Brooks - *humble questions* - are open ended questions that begin with phrases like "How did you...", "What's it like...", "Tell me about...", and "In what ways..." These questions surrender power to the other person, encouraging them "to take control and take the conversation where they want it to go." Or if we're first meeting someone, asking them "Where did you grow up?": a question that includes the past and not just the present day.<sup>17</sup> The good news is that as Jesus sees & knows us deeply, and lived the most fulfilled life loving people this way, He invites us also to be blessed - and be a blessing - by learning to connect more deeply with others.

I think most people have just never considered that conversationalism is a skill we can work on, but why not? If we care about loving people and them being seen, I'd suggest this is one of the primary ways we can improve our capacities and for people to experience us as more like Christ.

Now, again, I promise I'm not aiming to have you second-guess ourselves in future conversations at church. So maybe I can break any awkwardness for Fellowship Hour by suggesting you ask each other: "Tell me what you thought about John's sermon topic today?" or "In what ways did you think the sermon got a little too directive?" and y'all can bag on me a bit. :)

But if you do notice me or someone else employing a strategy on this list in a future conversation, extend some grace and remember it's only being done in love, because they want you to feel valued, heard, and understood - they want you to feel seen like Jesus sees you.

Will you pray with me?

Lord Jesus, we thank you for the Good Shepherd that you are: that you see us deeply and perfectly. And we rejoice to know what a delight that is for you. Would you help us to take some of the things we've talked about today and to apply them, trusting that it will not only be a blessing to others, but a blessing to us. Would you give us the grace or courage or discernment to take steps toward learning to see others more deeply like you do. Amen.

<sup>16</sup> Brooks: "These questions are impossible to answer. They're another way of saying, 'I'm greeting you, but I don't actually want you to answer.'"

<sup>17</sup> Brooks on more good questions: "Sometimes you're at a neighborhood barbecue or a work function with people you don't know or barely know at all. When an Illuminator is in those situations, he'll ask questions that probe for commonalities. I've learned to sometimes ask, 'Where did you grow up?' which gets people talking about their hometown. I travel a lot for work, so there's a good chance I'll know something about their place. Other easy introductory questions are things like 'That's a lovely name. How did your parents choose it?' That prompts conversations about cultural background and family history."