

One New Book for the Preacher

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THE SHAPE OF LIVING: SPIRITUAL DIRECTIONS FOR EVERYDAY LIFE by David F. Ford. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1998. 224 pages.

My copy of David F. Ford's book, *The Shape of Living: Spiritual Directions for Everyday Life* is dog-eared, colored with highlighter, and marked with pieces of sticky notes. These markings are a visible testament to the book's frequent use and a tribute to its discourse on practical spirituality.

The Shape of Living addresses important issues with a conversation of sound theological reflection, personal experience, and the poetry of Micheal O'Siadhail. Ford addresses the faith-shaping spaces and events of our lives, the everyday stuff, which makes the book valuable for the preacher.

Ford says that most of us feel overwhelmed by life. In the introduction he gives us three imperatives to faithful living in the midst of being overwhelmed: name it, describe it, and attend to it. The ensuing seven chapters address the practical and spiritual ways in which individuals within a faith community can use these imperatives to participate in the process of their own life shaping.

In "Faces and Voices: Shaping a Heart," Ford explores the ways in which the people from our past and present influence who we are and how we live. The overarching question, "Before whom do we live?" guides the exploration of our heart's contours and exposes the ways in which our hearts have been shaped for community life and inform the most basic way we address the spaces and needs of others. For the preacher, this chapter reinforces the importance of belonging to a community with shared values and models which center on God's guidelines for shaping a people of God.

In the second chapter Ford examines the leading themes of our lives. "Vocations and Compulsions: Life-Shaping Desires" provides us with guidance we can use to examine our vocational call. Society's attention to developing and cultivating our desires and addictions for things not of God is addressed as the chapter begins; then Ford turns the focus to the story of God shaping a people: God's desire for us and how God's desire can become our desire. Ford uses a six point process to guide individuals in discerning their vocation: (1) seek and you will find; (2) remember key points in your past that shaped your vocational decision making; (3) read scriptures expecting insight into who you are in God; 4) look for role models and testimonies as to how others have developed their vocations;(5) look for a companion as you explore the work of God's call; and (6) always "be alert!"

In "Power, Virtue, and Wisdom: The Shaping of Character," Ford addresses the development of good character. Given that God is gracious, provides abundantly, and expects a response from us, how are we to live? This chapter is about "the Christian way of being overwhelmed by goodness in joyful responsibility." While that statement sounds ethereal, Ford uses Scripture to remind us that God is for us, Jesus walks with us, and the power of the Holy Spirit transforms us. As we claim these truths, we are

able to think and behave as people who understand what it means to be responsible before God. Included in this chapter is a powerful illustration of the consequences of irresponsible behavior.

Ford explores ways of caring for our souls in “Secrets and Disciplines: Soul-Shaping.” The chapter begins with discussions of secrecy and intimacy, and the power of those to shape our “selves”; Ford then proceeds to say things preachers are always saying, yet in a fresh way. Thus, discussions of “Praying as Long as it Takes, Intensive Time Away with Other People, Giving Generously and Secretly, Music, The Jesus Prayer, Bible Study, and Silence” sound like new, helpful, important practices that one would naturally include as part of one’s daily routine, rather than a duty list of drudgery.

The urgency of work in our culture is Ford’s focus in chapter five, “Leisure and Work: Shaping Time and Energy.” Most any member of the congregation will be able to identify with the force that drives our society to do more, in order to make more, so that one can have more. Ford explains the impact of this constant message in such a way that even the workaholics in the crowd are left wondering: what happened? How did we lose sabbatical time? In answering these questions, Ford reveals an alternative economy based on the generosity of God and explains how ‘The Drama of Eucharistic Time’ models for us the way to experience God’s economy.

In “Knocked Out of Shape: Evil, Suffering and Death” Ford addresses the experience of the unexpected, the negative, the bad things that happen in the course of one’s lifetime. Throughout the book, Ford acknowledges that life can be overwhelming. He urges us to let God overwhelm us, rather than the things of the world. He names the things we attempt to avoid, the things that are uncomfortable, and suggests the Holy Week paradigm as a means of living with the difficult times of life. Ford expounds upon compassion, God’s and ours, as the healing balm at the heart of Christian faith and worship. He lifts up examples of those who have suffered for the sake of Christ and the ways in which they have found meaning in their experience.

In the final chapter, “Kaleidoscope: Resurrection, Joy and Feasting,” Ford reiterates the importance of one’s particular perception of God. Ron Cram, associate professor of Christian Education at Columbia Theological Seminary, once said that we can learn what others believe about God by observing their behavior. This is the very issue Ford deals with in this chapter. What sort of God we believe in, the way in which we trust the resurrection story, and our availability to transformation are the faith shaping elements which reveal our interpretations of resurrection joy. Ford uses the early church’s imagery of ‘perichoresis’ to suggest what goes on in the life of God. He concludes the chapter and book with a joyful description of God’s hospitality, using as illustration the final verses of Micheal O’Siadhail’s poem “Dance.”

As a sermon resource, the book is an invitation to the preacher to ponder with the congregation such questions as: How are our hearts shaped by others? What are our vocations and how do they fulfill our deep desires? What is real goodness as it relates to one’s character? How do we explore the mystery of our souls? How do we find sabbath in society’s competitive ethos? How do we live when we are overwhelmed by life’s worst experiences? How do we feast on joy?

These are very poignant words, for very confused times.