

The Not-So-Prodigal Son Returns
Oak Grove Presbyterian, Paul David Stanko
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It was the fall of 1984 and I was a freshman at Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Ia. I was sitting on the far side of the room in the “Nature of Science” course, required for all freshmen, when “He” walked in the room. I know this sounds like I am making it up, but I swear it happened like this: it was like something out of a movie. The lights in the room dimmed and a spotlight illuminated him; a choir of angels in the background sang “AHHHH” ...it’s one of the few times in my life I remember a voice, other-than-my-own, scream through my head. **“I know you.”** We did not meet for three more months.



Friends of mine were telling me about this friend of theirs, David, who wasn’t resonating with his roommate. I was *not* resonating with mine, so after a brief negotiation of the details, he moved in and we became roommates—soon after that, best friends. Soon after *that*, boyfriends. But it was the ‘80’s and neither one of us could be gay. Thus began the emotional rollercoaster ride from the incredible highs of young love to devastating lows and back again as we both tried to figure out who and *how* we loved—the whole while remaining best friends.

After graduation, I moved back to the Twin Cities and David moved to New York City to pursue his dreams of being a daytime TV star. After a brief stay in New York, David moved to the Twin Cities—his dreams of stardom crushed like sands through the hourglass, so are the “Days of Our Lives.” I will always cherish that one spring day in 1991 when we walked around Lake Bde Maka Ska: David was engaged to be married and I was in a destructive relationship: we talked of running away together to the west coast: leaving the struggles of our life *here* and starting fresh—together. It was one of those soul-level conversations.

The fall of 1991 found me at Dayton’s Southdale Marketplace Foods, honing my skills as a food service manager. On Black Friday, as we prepared to meet the onslaught of holiday shoppers searching for that perfect gift at the perfect price, the phone rang: it was for me—and it was my mom. It turns out David had been killed in a car accident the previous night—Thanksgiving night—while heading back to the Twin Cities after visiting his family in Iowa. And my head exploded.

Would you pray with me? May the words of my mouth and the mediations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight oh God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Wow! Way to kill the energy of a live stream, Paul David. I know—but trust me... that isn't the end of the story.

Good morning, Oak Grove Presbyterian Church. Like the Prodigal Son, I have returned home. (Ok, it's nothing like the prodigal son... I have no brother to divide a fortune with, there is only my younger sister, Rachelle, in Seattle ...in fact, there *was* no fortune, I don't THINK I have been living a dissolute lifestyle, pretty sure I haven't been womanizing...anyway...) Oak Grove, you are part of me, and I, a part of you. This church family provided the foundation for who I am as a follower of Christ and as a church leader in the wider world. I was baptized here, confirmed here, sang in many choirs over the years, worked here for a bit in the 1990's, my sister was married here, and both my parents had memorial services here. While parts of the building have changed from when I was a kid, the heart of the church I grew up in remains.

I currently serve in leadership at Spirit of Hope United Methodist Church in Golden Valley and they send their greetings to you all this morning. You'll find my bio and social media contacts in the bulletin. And I want to thank you for allowing me to spend some time with you this morning.

We're going to be adding some new things to the service this morning. Notice in the chat window questions for your consideration and participation as well as videos and resources for you to come back to and explore to add dimension to what we talk about today. Feel free to comment or simply reflect upon the questions we put there, or better yet, come back later this week and add your thoughts. Part of my personal belief is ministry is an interactive sport. Since we're in a virtual environment, might as well be interactive, right?

Where are you watching from?

There are a couple of things I'm going to ask from you in our time together today. I am going to ask you for an open mind and an attitude of "What if?" What if what I talk about today is true? We're going to go places you may not have thought about before, especially in this context, so for the sake of time; I'm going to ask you to ask *yourself* "what if what I say is true?"

The second thing I'm going to ask you is **not to believe a thing I say**. Nope, not one word! Test it out! Question EVERYTHING. Come up with your OWN

conclusions. Pretty good advice for all things that come out of the mouths of preachers, politicians and ANYTHING you read on the internet! Fair enough?

I remember, shortly after David's funeral, standing back in the kitchen at



Dayton's Southdale making egg salad and thinking, "You are off exploring the universe and I am standing here making egg salad. What is wrong with this picture?" I can pinpoint David's reemergence into non-physical as the catalyst—spurring me on to dig deeper *into* this thing called life. I began to question—everything.

Here is what I have come to know: The only thing that matters in the end, is Love. Amen. [Dramatic Pause] What? Not enough? Fair. Perhaps you will allow me to expand on that. While that statement is absolute truth, what is *love*? Well, we know from Sunday school, "God is love" ergo "The only thing that matters in the end is God." That really doesn't help us much, does it?

I mean what is God? Right? We know from scripture, the writer of Isaiah had a vision of God "Sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of his robe filled the temple." That's one big dude! But IS God really a Big dude? That doesn't seem right.

Maybe there are some clues as to what God is within us; I mean in Genesis—now I am unclear if this is a direct quote—but God is reported to have said, "Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness". And it goes on to say, "So God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." I was left wondering how God can be BOTH male and female—and how can the image of God be realized in different genders, unless we're not talking about appearance, but something else?

What does "made in the image of God" mean to you?

I think I found an answer. Now remember, this is only one possible answer.

In that Freshman *Nature of Science* course, I was taught the first law of thermodynamics, which is a major tenant of science. This law states, "energy can neither be created nor destroyed; energy can only be transferred or changed from one form to another." What happens when we view that law in the light of our gospel reading this morning? In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was

with God, and the Word was God. ²He was with God in the beginning. ³Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

If you weren't aware, common understanding is "The Word" is a reference to the Christ Consciousness that would incarnate in our plane as Jesus of Nazareth. And what is a word in our plane but a sound—a vibration if you will. And what is a vibration but an expression of energy in waveform. So perhaps John reads, "And through this expression of energy in a wave form all things were made; without this expression of energy in a wave form nothing was made that has been made."

This passage could be understood to say life came "from God," created through the vibration of the Christ Consciousness. But I think it implies more than that. What if it not only came FROM God, but in fact *Is* God...remembering energy can neither be created nor destroyed, perhaps we are particles of "God Energy"? Consider a drop from the ocean: One drop has the same make up as the whole ocean, yet it is separate: different. You would not call that drop "the ocean" would you? (Of course, you wouldn't) But yet, it is OF the ocean. And were you to put it back, it would go right back to being *part* of the ocean. What IF it's the same with all creation? Not just created BY God, but created OF God. Wouldn't that make everything divine—more magical—knowing it is a part OF God? Wouldn't that put divinity literally everywhere?

So, if Divinity is everywhere, that would also mean YOU are a part of that same Divinity. It would mean YOU are created from a piece of God. Perhaps that part, that spark, is what we call our Soul. It would also mean Shawn from the office who keeps swiping your lunch is part of that same Divinity. Does that change how you see him? Will it change how you interact with him?

How does it make you feel when you think of people you do not like as being part of God, just as you are part of God?

And what about the inevitable problems that rear their ugly heads in life? If God is part of all things, is it *possible* that problems we encounter aren't really problems at all, but opportunities to clarify our preferences? I mean, if everything is part of Divinity, why would Divinity do something to itself just to punish itself? When you stub your toe, you don't punish your toe by smacking it again, right? No, you help it heal. *Perhaps* instead, things we perceive as "bad" are attracted to our experience simply an opportunity for us to decide what we prefer in this life. By knowing what you don't want, it strengthens your conviction of what you DO want! "Boy that car accident wasn't a wow, but now I know I don't want that

again, so I will drive more diligently.” That is growth: evolution if you will. What if this whole Divine world is really connected—is working FOR us to help us become all that we are called to be? Isn’t that something that might change how we interact with each other and our world? Doesn’t that take some of the edge off?

Can you wrap your thoughts around the universe conspiring with you for your highest good even in times like these?

In the Hindu tradition, they greet each other with Namaste--directly translated, it means, “the divine in me bows to the divine in you.” I like that. It calls us to remember not only are we part of God, but so is every person we encounter. How would our society be different if we truly saw everyone we encountered—even the jerks—as divine—as a Spark of God Energy? How would we treat the WORLD differently if we realized the same thing?

And we know God is without beginning and without end. But we die, right? As I alluded, David’s death hit me far harder than I could have *ever* imagined. It caused me to question what is the meaning of Life? What is the meaning of Death? What is God and why would a 26-year-old young man, whom I loved to my core, be taken from me? I immersed myself into the study of religions and how humans see God. I plowed through sacred text after sacred text. I studied world religions with a passion looking for the answers that seem to elude me. Then I stumbled upon a book called “Embraced by the Light” by Betty J Eddie.

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On the night of November 19, 1973, following surgery, thirty-one-year-old wife and mother Betty J. Eadie died...and came back. Her book tells the extraordinary tale of the events that followed; her astonishing proof of life after physical death. THAT resonated with me. It stirred something in my soul, and I wanted to know more! I devoured every book I could find on the subject of Near-Death Experiences. I was beginning to realize that what I had learned about here, on Sunday mornings, about eternal life—maybe it was real. Growing up we TALKED about eternal life. But no one ever LIVED like that was true.

Do you believe in life after death?

I remember I was at my maternal Grandfather’s funeral, standing with my mom’s sister, by his casket and she said to me, “It’s OK to cry”... and I didn’t feel the need to cry. I didn’t WANT to cry, but it seemed to be expected. I was young and

this was my first encounter with this thing called death, but it seemed sadness was an expectation. But that didn't jive with what I was taught every Sunday. I couldn't understand why we were sad. Wasn't he up in heaven now watching over us? Isn't that a good thing? I mean, aren't we eternal? When David died, I cried. But that came from a wholly different place. .. and by that point, I had forgotten that we really ARE eternal.

So, my quest continued until I stumbled upon a TV show called "Crossing Over" with John Edwards. Do any of you know it? How about "Long Island Medium"? Yeah, I love that one! Here are shows about individuals who claim to be receiving information from people that have "crossed over" to the other side. That can't be real, right?

Those people are called mediums. Mediumship is simply a spiritual gift whereby a medium is able to access information from a place the general public may not be able to readily access. While that is not in the scope of our time together today, suffice to say the Biblical warnings against mediums and fortunetellers are to steer people away from the bad ones: the charlatans. And there are bad mediums; just as there are bad preachers who claim, "Jesus wants you to buy him a new jet."

You heard about Jesse Duplantis? This Prosperity Pastor claims Jesus wants his followers to buy him ANOTHER private jet? Yeah, I believe THAT type of person is what scripture is warning us against!

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I wanted to know if life after death was real. DO we really survive death? That quest brought me to "The Center for Spiritual Development" in South Minneapolis. The proprietor, Echo Bodine is a famous author, psychic medium and ghost buster here in the Twin Cities and was my stepping off point for the more "uncharted waters" of humans understanding of the Divine. Through her, I became connected with the Manhattan Medium, Thomas John, who would bring me the answers I so desperately sought. I got his phone number and booked an appointment.

Then one February afternoon, my phone rang. A reading is a lot like what you see on TV, but it's YOUR dead people. Thomas is a master evidentiary medium. That means he is really, really, really good at bringing forth confirming details that no one but you and your dead person would know about.

Chat Insert: <https://www.mediumthomas.com>

It was a powerfully healing experience. 23 years of pain I didn't know I still carried vanished as he told me things there is no way he could have known. Here was the undeniable proof I had been searching for. David still existed. You know, it wasn't the things you'd *expect* to hit you hardest that sank the experience home for me. Yes, he got David's name, yes, he got how he died and the fact it was a long time ago, yes, he got that we loved each other...yes he is still around me... Those things are expected. Less expected was when he asked me if I had written a song for David, and had given it to his family--which I did and had and is on my first CD which almost no one now knows about except the 75 people who bought a copy back in 1997 (actually, 74, I found a copy at Cheepo in the used record bin). I guarantee you none of those remaining 74 people live in New York City where Thomas is from.

But what really brought the truth of the whole experience of readings home to me was when he asked me "Do you have a dog? (Remember, we're on the phone and we've never met) Did you just change your dog's food?" What? Yes, we have a dog and yes...we changed his food last week. What? Because it has nothing to do with ANYTHING—yet is so true and arbitrary—THAT drove it home. It was something no one, *NO ONE*, but my husband and I, knew and the odds of guessing those two facts back to back are astronomical. And it doesn't matter... cosmically.

Because it doesn't matter, it matters the most. Proof that something more than I understand is going on. ...and if THAT information—information that NO ONE, NO ONE KNOWS about is true, surely there must be some truth to the rest as well. There is no such thing as death! You know that means you are eternal too. Let that sink in for a moment: You are eternal. You have always been, you will always be. Does that free you a little bit? Does that take some of the pressure off to be "perfect"? Does that free you up to live YOUR truth?

Back to the "made in the image of God" question. If we are part of God, shaped through the vibration of the Christ Consciousness and eternal LIKE God, might we share other characteristics OF God?

When I think of God, I think of God as the Source of all. God is the Creator of everything. Is it possible that we, too, share *that* characteristic? Are we creators? Well, all you have to do is go to a museum to know humans are capable of creating magnificent art masterpieces or turn on the radio to hear music of every

kind created by our fellow humans. But the power to create and shape our world? That isn't a thing, right?

What are you good at creating?

Remember when we were talking about vibration a few moments ago? Modern Physicists like Nassim Haramein have begun to bridge the gap between quantum physics and spirituality. Some of those theories acknowledge the vibratory nature of the universe—sighting the fact that atoms, which make up everything, are constantly in motion—through this expression of energy in a waveform all things were made that were made.

There is this universal law called the Law of Attraction which state, “That which is like unto itself is drawn,” or more simply put, “Birds of a feather flock together.” The idea here is that because everything is in motion, at any given moment, we are giving off energy—a “vibe” if you will—to which the universe is responding; attracting things to us that resonate with the vibration or energy we are giving out. But do we give off a vibe?

You've walked into a room before where the tension is so thick you could cut with a knife, right. THAT is an example of a space where the “vibe” is strong. Or perhaps you like hanging around someone who always makes you feel better just by being near them?

Have you ever experienced the “vibe” of a place, good or bad? What did you do when you felt it?

This is just the nickel tour. There is material for a lifetime of sermons on how this all works, and Jesus talks about it a LOT in the scriptures, not using those terms or words. For example, in Matthew, Jesus says “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.” Our energy is always asking, seeking and knocking and, to paraphrase Jesus, the Universe is always answering. You are constantly giving off a “vibe” and the universe takes those as its marching orders: giving to each of us, as co-creators, what we resonate with both individually and as a co-creative group. Fellow co-creators, are we happy with what we have created? If for any reason we are not, we need to take accountability for that, and work to change it.

I believe this notion of personal accountability is central to understanding, not only the Law of Attraction, but all the teachings of Jesus. Christ is continually

suggesting a loving way of living to his disciples. He understood how energy worked. His calling is for us to be active, loving, co-creators of our world.

We don't do this by

- “liking” a post of someone feeding the homeless, we do this by JOINING with them in feeding the homeless.
- *saying* Black Lives Matter; we do this by actively changing the systems to ENSURE black people KNOW their lives matter.
- quoting scripture **at** each other: we do this by LIVING scripture WITH each other.

We do this by being Jesus to the world.

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By being a living example, we send out energy that attracts others seeking to live that same example in our presence. And the energy grows. Then others might be called to examine where they are in their journey and be inspired by seeing us and wish to join together, with us, and the energy grows stronger, calling even more to witness what has started, and so on and so on...the possibility of an ever-expanding energy attracting more and more to it. Go ye into ALL the world, indeed!

And THAT is love. That sharing and joining of energy; that reconnecting with other sparks of God energy; moving from a “me” energy to the “we” energy of our human family.

You see, the only thing that matters in the end is LOVE because that is the only thing that truly exists. LOVE and GOD... are the same vibration. It's the building block of our Universe; from where all things come and to where all things go. It bridges all class status, race status, gender identity status... It crosses the threshold we call death to heal us because we are, in fact, simply healing ourselves because *we are all one*; created by and **of** the One God and Source of All. I believe THAT is the Good News of the Gospel.

So Oak Grove, the not-so-prodigal son returned. Hopefully some thoughts for you to chew on as you go through your week. Thank you for all you have given to my family and me over the years. I look forward to our continued journey, together. It is a true joy to share in Christ's call with you.

Namaste. Amen.