

Our Baptism

Luke 3:15-22

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One of my favourite political and cultural commentators to read is David Brooks, one of the conservative columnists for the *New York Times*. Back in 2015, Brooks wrote a column entitled “What is Your Purpose?” in which he discussed the lack of conversation in our society of meaningful discussion of how to live a good and worthwhile life. He wrote,

Public debate is now undermoralized and overpoliticized. We have many shows where people argue about fiscal policy but not so many on how to find a vocation or how to measure the worth of your life. In fact, we now hash out our moral disagreement indirectly, under the pretense that we’re talking about politics, which is why arguments about things like tax policy come to resemble holy wars.

According to Brooks, we’ve turned too many discussions into political discussions, instead of having the deeper conversations about morality. He continued,

The shift has meant there is less moral conversation in the public square. I doubt people behave worse than before, but we are less articulate about the inner life. There are fewer places in public where people are talking about the things that matter most.

As a result, many feel lost or overwhelmed. They feel a hunger to live meaningfully, but they don’t know the right questions to ask, the right vocabulary to use, the right place to look or even if there are ultimate answers at all.

Brooks came to understand that a fundamental problem in our society is that “we are morally inarticulate.” From this conclusion came his book *The Road to Character*, which our Theology Brunch read and discussed last summer.

Near the conclusion of that book, Brooks presented “The Humility Code,” his fifteen propositions for how to live a better life. Under the first one he wrote,

All human beings seek to lead lives not just of pleasure, but of purpose, righteousness, and virtue. . . . The best life is oriented around the increasing excellence of the soul and is nourished by moral joy, the quiet sense of gratitude and tranquility that comes as a byproduct of successful moral struggle. . . . Life is essentially a moral drama, not a hedonistic one.

Brooks is worried about a loss of moral articulation and discussion of character. And the deeper problems of our society. We have lost our understanding what people are for, what constitutes a good life, what is our meaning and purpose.

How, then, would you answer those questions?

Well, I'm a baptized follower of Jesus Christ and member of the church. Which gives me answers those questions.

When we are baptized, we become part of the Christian church, announcing that the name of Christian will identify us. Our Christian identity will help us to make commitments, to determine what is good, and to decide how to act.

Walter Brueggemann, the great UCC biblical scholar and theologian, writes that our Christian baptismal way of life is "an alternative of covenantal neighborliness." We have decided to follow God in treating our fellow citizens, the poor, the stranger, the enemy according to neighborliness. Which, he writes, yields the fruit of the spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

A Christian, then, shouldn't lack moral articulation, as we receive a deep and rich tradition of moral understanding, the practices that help to cultivate the virtues, the community of formation that encourages us along the road, and the spiritual guidance that inspires us to our best.

On this Baptism of the Christ Sunday, as we confess our faith and remember our vows, it is an opportunity for us to commit ourselves once again. Not to a list of ideas. But to a way of life. To a certain way of viewing the world, of determining what is good, of shaping who we are. And that way of life is centered in the story of Jesus the Christ, for in him the life-giving purposes of God are revealed.

First Central is family with open hearts, rich traditions, and curious minds and together we are on a spiritual journey, exploring every angle, embracing uncertainty, and pursuing wisdom. And that journey finds its source in this story, the story of Jesus.

And this story, and the tradition it birthed, tells us that we are Children of God, beloved of our heavenly parent, radiant with glorious light, marked in a special way, called to a life of adventure and goodness, entrusted with a holy mission.

Today, let us remember our baptism, remember who and whose we are, and be thankful.