

Who Are You?

John 1:19-34

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“Who Are You?” they ask John the Baptist.

The philosopher Charles Taylor wrote that the best answer to the question “Who am I?” is “what is of crucial importance” to you. He wrote:

To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine . . . what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand.

Today is Baptism of the Christ Sunday; the opportunity every year when we reaffirm our baptismal vows and confess our faith. It is a great way to start each new year. Today’s ritual helps to remind us what it means to be baptized; what it means to identify as a Christian.

For when we are baptized, we become part of the Christian church; we announce that the name of Christian will help to identify us. That means our Christian identity will provide the horizon in which we are capable of taking a stand. Our Christian identity will help us to make commitments, to determine what is good, and to decide how to act.

Our religious faith is part of the answer to the question, “Who are you?” Which is why a crisis in faith can be so traumatic.

Back in November, Fred Nielsen led a First Forum class on the Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon*, shortly after its local run at the Orpheum. During the class, Fred played a YouTube clip of the song “I Believe.” In that song Elder Price, a young Mormon missionary serving in a very poor area of Uganda, is troubled because his faith is shaken by experiences that are outside his expectations and for which he is unprepared.

Ever since I was a child I tried to be the best
So, what happened?
My family and friends all said I was blessed
So, what happened?
It was supposed to be all so exciting to be teaching of Christ 'cross the sea,
But, I allowed my faith to be shaken.
Oh, what's the matter with me?

Elder Price determines that in the midst of this crisis the only response open to him is blind

faith. He sings:

I must trust that my Lord is mightier
And always has my back.
Now I must be completely devout
I can't have even one shred of doubt...

He then continues by professing his beliefs, in a way that is very similar to a creed, confession, or statement of faith:

I believe that the Lord, God, created the universe.
I believe that He sent His only Son to die for my sins.
And I believe that ancient Jews built boats and sailed to America
I am a Mormon,
And a Mormon just believes.

And the list of beliefs continues verse after verse, all while Elder Price musters the courage to confront the warlord who has threatened him and the villagers. He has little compunction challenging the man, because he believes that God will protect him and that the man will be immediately converted to the Mormon faith once he hears Elder Price's witness.

During the Omaha performance I attended, the crowd, including myself, laughed wildly throughout the song anytime Elder Price mentioned some doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. When Fred played the YouTube clip for our First Forum class, many also laughed. And for good reason. The song is very funny. It is intended to make us laugh.

But it also seems to do something very profound. The song wants to catch us laughing. Fred made this clear by asking our First Forum class some questions after he played the YouTube clip—"Why did you laugh at someone's religious beliefs? We don't usually laugh at someone's religious beliefs. And why did you laugh at the specifically Mormon doctrines, but not the more general Christian beliefs?" We had quite a discussion in First Forum in response to these questions.

As Fred played that YouTube clip, I had a very different response. I cried. I did so because I think the song is actually very sad, because it is about a young man experiencing a crisis of faith and all the loss that that entails. For Elder Price his religious worldview provided coherence, meaning, and a sense of identity; all of that is in the process of collapsing around him. He isn't sure what to believe or do anymore. And because of that, he isn't quite sure who he is anymore. His foundation has crumbled; he has lost his roots, his source, his center.

And maybe some of you have been through that experience. Growing up as a Southern Baptist, I did. There came a series of moments in my life for which the worldview of my faith had not prepared me and that worldview came apart. Many friends of mine lost their faith in early adulthood as they went through the same process. Somehow, I kept my faith, but reworked it. I learned that there were other ways of being a Christian, other ways of interpreting the Bible. I fashioned a new worldview and found community with like-minded believers.

Though these changes in my own beliefs have been liberating, there are times when I'm

nostalgic for the coherence and some of the riches of that earlier belief-system. There is a sense of loss associated with the change in belief. Our personal identity is so tightly interwoven with our worldview, with what we believe and are committed to, that when our beliefs change, something about us changes as well.

Which gets me to the nature of belief. I said last week that during this Epiphany series, we would explore what it means to believe. And I said, right off the bat, that believing is not simply a matter of intellectually agreeing with a series of doctrinal statements. That's one thing Elder Price learns.

In the musical *The Book of Mormon*, Elder Price learns a handful of lessons, and learns them painfully. He learns that the world is more complex than he ever imagined and that evil and injustice will not simply, easily, and magically disappear. His worldview had not prepared him for the long, difficult, adventurous work that is actually required in order to bring salvation.

He also learns this lesson that believing is not a matter of getting the doctrines all correct. It is something else. Near the end of the musical he says:

We are still Latter Day Saints, all of us, even if we've changed some things or we break the rules or we have complete doubt that God exists, we can still all work together and make this our paradise planet.

And it is in that changed context that he can sing again and with exuberance, "I believe."

What has changed? How is his believing different by the end of the story?

The Gospel of John opened by informing us that in Jesus would be revealed the life-giving purposes of God. And we are invited to believe in the name of Jesus. Through Jesus we could all become enlightened to the true life that God desires for us. John the Baptist gives testimony supporting this claim—Jesus is the one sent from God, the true light, the lamb who takes away our sins, the one who will baptize us in God's Spirit. John makes this claim because when he baptized Jesus, John saw the Spirit of God descend upon Jesus.

What does the Gospel of John mean when it invites us to believe in Jesus?

One thing to note, the word is always used as a verb and never as a noun. The word "belief" does not appear in this Gospel. Warren Carter, a professor in the St. Paul School of Theology, has been very helpful to me in his commentary on this Gospel. He suggests that the use of the verb instead of the noun is itself significant. He writes,

Whatever else the word ["believing"] means, the use of the verb rather than the noun suggests "believing" is not static, not an inner possession, not a private disposition. It is an action or activity that constitutes and expresses an identity in an ongoing way of life, an active and continuing commitment. It has the sense of living faithfully and loyally, of acting with fidelity.

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. What do we believe? We believe that in the story of Jesus we can find something to believe in. Something to commit ourselves to. Something to be loyal to. Something that will bring coherence and meaning and will help us to answer that question, "Who are you?"

Let us remember our baptism and be thankful.