

He has absolutely no idea this is happening, but I have been having a fascinating conversation with David Brooks for the last couple of weeks. Recently, he was being interviewed by Audie Cornish about his new book, *The Road to Character*, and to me, he makes a rather surprising claim: career success doesn't make you happy. As one who has a job that more often than not *does* seem to make me happy, I was a bit taken aback. But then, he had one particularly pithy quote to which I had a somewhat more visceral reaction and it was this, "I am more or less paid to be a narcissistic blowhard, to volume my opinions to appear more confident about them than I really am, to appear smarter than I really am, and to appear better and more authoritative than I really am."¹

It's not rocket science to see what a preacher wouldn't like about this. Any preacher worth their salt better be preaching the *truth*, and even more, be at least somewhat confident in it. Moreover, I had the deep privilege this past week of sitting with our session to listen to the faith statements of our confirmands when they joined the church, and they were concerned about truth.

As a sidebar, I'd like to say how proud I am of their faith statements – and that they read them. When most folks are a little bit bashful about talking about faith and a lot bashful about speaking in public, and these young men and women did both and did it beautifully. Can I get an "Amen," on that?

Here's why what Brooks said caught me: whether I agree with him all the time or not, I've always considered him to be one of the most civil, courteous and intelligent of columnists, and frankly, have often given his viewpoint more than a little bit of a benefit

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of doubt because of his courtesy and civility – I’ve always thought that he attempted to give his version of the truth as genteelly as it could possibly be given. “Narcissistic” and “blowhard” aren’t the words that come to mind.

But Brooks wasn’t just seeking to be self-deprecating, he was trying to get to a deeper truth – that of what brings fulfillment. And while I am waiting to get the book to read more about it, in the interview he juxtaposes where we are today – in a culture designed to make us feel more and more self-important, with a culture that prizes moral courage and character.

And I don’t want to spend too much time on this, so quickly, in order to get to that, he says we need a concrete moral vocabulary. He believes we’ve lost the meanings of words such as grace and sin when fattening desserts qualify as the latter.

And into the Christian moral vocabulary, the author of 1 John sprinkles a few words that I’d like for us to think about today, *truth* and *action*.

The first point I’d like to make is that truth and action are expressions of love. 1 John says, “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us--and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”

Brooks tells the story of encountering a group in Frederick, MD who, in his words, “Just glowed.”

He says, “I would walk into a room of 30 people, mostly women, probably 50-80 years old, and they just radiated a generosity of spirit. They radiated patience. And most of all, they radiated gratitude for life. And I remember thinking, ‘You know, I’ve achieved

career success in life, but I haven't achieved that. What they have is that inner-light that I do not have.”²

What's so interesting to me about this interview and about a subsequent column that he wrote is that Brooks is striving for almost the same thing that human beings with awareness of morality have been struggling for thousands of years, well before Jesus was even born – what makes a person good? What makes life good?

If you live a good life, will you find fulfillment?

These are good questions, and I imagine the answers to them are deeply important for each of us – and if we are in the position to nurture children and young men and women, either because they are our own children or because we have made a vow to them at baptism, they are important questions for each of us.

Who among us would choose for anyone a path of un-fulfillment?

And yet, I often hear from people who find that what they are spending the majority of their time on – the seconds, minutes, days, and years of their lives on – does not in the final analysis, amount to much.

We want to be happy. We want to be good. We suspect the two are related.

1 John seems to think that the answer lies in *love*. What's more, *love* is lived in concrete fashion as truth and action.

We'll get to truth in a minute, because that's such big topic, but let's look at action just a second.

Can actions make us happy? Can actions make us good?

Actions can certainly lead to happiness and unhappiness.

² Ibid.

Frank Bruni had a wonderful op-ed piece in the Times this past week. Writing from Atlantic City, Bruni and his siblings had gone gambling with their father – it brought him joy to get his family around him to play blackjack. So they went to Atlantic City and his father promised to show them a trick when they got the blackjack table that would guarantee that they were all winners. Bruni then spent his column relating how his father has changed since he was widowed – specifically, by taking on the characteristics he always allowed his wife to live when she was still living. Bruni writes, “He held my sister’s hand through her divorce. He made sure to tell me and my partner that our place in the family was the same as any other couple’s. And his nine grandchildren, only two of whom my mother lived to meet, came to know him as their most fervent and forgiving cheerleader, ever vigilant, ever indulgent. Their birthdays are the sturdiest part of his memory... a generous man from the start, he has grown somehow even more generous still, not just with items of measurable value but with those of immeasurable worth, like his time. His gestures. His emotions.”³

Bruni concludes by sharing his father’s secret for how to make sure each child became a winner at the blackjack table. He told them all to hold out their hands when they got there, and he placed two one-hundred dollar bills in each child’s hand.

Actions may not make us good, but actions can be good.

Here’s what I want to say about action: it *can* be the expression of love.

But it’s not guaranteed to be.

So, let me give you a very simple litmus test to apply in living a Christian life – because if we’re seriously considering what makes a good life, what makes a fulfilled life and

³ Frank Bruni, *My Father’s Secret* in The New York Times, April 15, 2015.

we're doing so in a Christian church, it has to be formed and shaped by what makes us uniquely *Christian*.

Let me be clear: this does not mean that non-Christians can't do good things or that they don't. It does mean that for those of us who call ourselves Christian, that's our litmus test.

Would Jesus like what I am about to do? Is this action potentially pleasing to Jesus?

Or better yet, the ultimate litmus test: *is it loving?*

For Christians, the heart of our faith is that our lives are to be *loving*.

That can be lived out as a generosity of spirit, that can be lived out as a genuine concern for others – and if you don't do well with loving people in the abstract, go for the concrete: love the person right next to you, in front of you, behind you, and let it work out from there. I don't mean that right now in the church pew – I hope that part at least is easy - I mean that when you're in the car, in the grocery aisle – wherever – ***engage in loving action***.

Because the simple fact is that oftentimes the church is perceived as having an identity that is more concerned with truth than it is with action – we have something of a reputation, sadly, for being the martinets of the world with our eyes on the rule-books, and the church isn't going to last very long as an arbitrator of rules.

Indeed, we've been so concerned with the rules of faith in our history – not Morningside Presbyterian Church particularly, but the church generally, that Harvey Cox characterized the last epoch of church history – from Constantine right up to the present – as the era of belief.

Believe the right things, and everything will be fine, in fact, we've been so in thrall to this idea that for a certain segment of the church the answer became, "believe the right things, and you'll be saved."

"Believe in the truth," so many said, "And you'll be saved."

But here's the thing: the truth isn't a set of beliefs. The truth is a person.

Jesus is the truth.

Now, there is a caution to the church whenever we say this: let's not give the truth a makeover in our own image. Let's not make Jesus over as a contemporary but better version of ourselves.

Joe Small warns of this temptation in his wonderful book, The Preservation of the Truth, where he writes,

"The danger of crafting a Jesus in our own image is not confined to the past centuries or to academic historians. The danger is clear and ever present among us all. The Sunday School, 'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,' the suburban "Jesus the caring helper,' the Central American 'Jesus the revolutionary liberator,' and any number of other Jesuses may be nothing more than our own fabrications, forcing the 'historical Jesus' into the mold of our preferences and needs. The church's urgent task is always to test its preferred 'Jesus' by the accounts of the Gospels and the other New Testament writings."⁴

In other words, if we want to be faithful to the truth, let's not put Jesus in service to us.

Because if we want to be in service to the truth, then we're in service to Jesus.

Anytime a strong statement of truth is made in a multi-cultural, multi-faith environment such as Atlanta, where we live and work and play with people of different beliefs, it can

⁴ Small, Joseph D. The Preservation of the Truth. (Witherspoon: Louisville, 2005) pp20-21

look as though we are trying to strong-arm our faith onto other people without respect for their beliefs and their understanding of truth.

That is not what we're here to do. We're here to follow the truth ourselves.

For Christians, that means following Jesus.

For our confirmands, for our members, for those who worship here seeking the truth, that means **we follow Jesus**. We follow the person who *is* the truth.

You see, the truth doesn't change.

Jesus, the good shepherd, is the truth of the 23rd psalm. He is the truth of the Gospels.

He is the truth of the Epistles. He is the truth of the Revelation because he himself is God revealed to us.

So if we need a source for moral courage and the ability to seek a way of life that is not centered on self, but rather on truth, that way is before us.

It really is a very simple message to us today:

“We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us--and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.