

I have long been a fan of the comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes*. Perhaps it's the nod to our reformed heritage that makes it appeal to me, but while the strip was being written, I loved following the adventures of the irascible little boy Calvin and his sardonic stuffed tiger Hobbes. Whether the adventures of Spaceman Spiff or the misadventures of trying to pelt Susie with a slushball, Calvin embodied all of the wonder at the world that is endemic to a six year old boy.

But whether you remember Calvin and Hobbes or not, there is one sub-plot with which I believe we can all identify, that of Calvin's aversion to chores doled out by his father with the sage observation that they built character. Handed a snow shovel and shoved out the door, Calvin once notably lamented, "Pretty convenient how every time I build character, Dad saves a couple hundred bucks."

That pretty much wraps up how most of us feel about character building, I expect. I can name a laundry list of "Character-building" activities that I've survived: picking up sticks, washing pots and pans I didn't dirty, making up the bed of my younger siblings... I could go on and on, telling you all about my deprived childhood wherein I didn't have bank of servants to do my bidding, only to cap it all off by sharing that whenever I shared my complaint with my dad, generally he would reply by having it worse. You know how it goes, "trudging five miles to school, uphill both ways, in the snow, carrying his bike because the chair fell off..."

Character building sounds about as enjoyable as eating liver and doing sit-ups.

But character matters, doesn't it?

Character is certainly marked by sometimes doing the things we don't want to do but there's more to it than that, surely?

I read an interesting op-ed piece by David Brooks in the New York Times this week. Apparently, Google has released a database of 5.2 million words published over the last five hundred years or so. If you search for a word, it will tell you how frequently it has been used through the years.

Brooks noted two things about the way we use words. First, over the past 48 years, words such as “self,” “unique,” “standout,” and phrases like, “I come first,” have been used more frequently than in previous years, and words and phrases like, “community,” “share,” “united,” and “common good” have been used less frequently than before.

But here's what Brooks said that troubled him – and troubled me – that over the course of the twentieth century, some other words have receded from our vocabulary, morally important words, such as “virtue,” “decency,” “honesty,” “compassion,” and others. Likewise, “bravery,” “humility,” “thankfulness,” and “helpfulness,” have declined.

Interesting, no?

Brooks surmises that as we become increasingly individualistic, we also become less morally aware.¹

I suppose it could be no more than a shift in the way we use vocabulary but what if the concept of character is in danger?

Now mind you, it is not an uncommon screed to declare that the world is going to hell in a hand-basket. It's not unique and it's not particularly original. And statistically, it's not more likely to be true in one generation than another. The world has been going to hell in

¹ David Brooks, “What Our Words Tell Us” in *The New York Times*. May 20, 2013

a hand-basket ever since the first time anyone remembered “the good old days.” There is good and bad in every generation. Sure, teenage pregnancy was lower in the fifties, but racial prejudice was worse. I could do a series of juxtapositions of good and bad in various generations, but you get the point.

But I wonder if we are talking enough about character these days?

You don’t need to come to church to hear that character matters, but I would also posit that the church needs to be talking about character and Christians need to be considering character in the manner of our lives.

Years ago, the Harvard College noted that a disproportionate number of its alumni were being featured in the papers for financial scandal. It’s not surprising at the one level, Harvard is a prestigious school and its alumni tend to be very successful and reach the top of their respective fields, including business. But the awareness that their alumni were being indicted a quicker clip than they wanted to see prompted them to ask whether or not their undergraduate curriculum was teaching such things as ethics and character.

Their answer was to throw Jesus at the problem and Professor Harvey Cox began teaching a moral reasoning course focusing on the person of Jesus Christ. To his utter astonishment it became a runaway success and the registrar had to move it to larger and larger venues. He writes of the experience, “These students, like increasing numbers of people in the modern world, sense – however vaguely – that there was something fundamentally inadequate about moral relativism. They were sickened by the devastation some technologies have wreaked on nature. They winced at the posturing of politicians and the deceptions of the media. They recognized that advertising is saturated with

calculated sham... but when it came to sorting through real ethical choices in conversation with other people, they seemed awkward and stifled.”

He concludes, “But above almost anything else, they loathed the thought of being looked upon as judgmental or ‘holier than thou.’ The virtue they admired most was tolerance.”²

Character matters. And the church must say so.

Character matters, and the church must show that we know this – and that is the heart of the baptismal vow that we make when we baptize adults and children in this place.

And the only way to keep that vow – to live the Christian life – is to have an internal moral compass that can say, “this is okay,” and “this is not okay.”

Judgmentalism has no place in the church, but good character most certainly does.

The church has to base its understanding of Christian character on the person of Jesus Christ.

Indeed the apostle Paul has some very clear words to speak about character. He writes, “Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts.”³

Let’s just stop here for a second on *suffering*. We have seen suffering in recent memory – indeed, we’ve seen it in the past week, and I want to be very clear about this: *God does not will suffering to happen*.

God does not promise to stop suffering from happening, but neither does God will suffering to happen. Tomorrow is memorial day. We will give thanks for those who have given their lives and their limbs in the pursuit of freedom and justice – and

² Harvey Cox, When Jesus Came to Harvard, Houghton-Mifflin, Boston, 2004. P9

³ Romans 5:3-5

simultaneously know that war brings tremendous suffering. But God does not start wars, and God does not build bombs. Natural disasters happen – God made the universe to work in a certain way and when we, through the activities of trade build cities in vulnerable places or possibly contribute to climate change that yields bigger and fiercer storms, suffering ensues. But God does not will suffering. Tragedies happen, and correct and we lament them, but God didn't build the guns or the pressure-cookers, and yes, suffering follows, but God didn't will it.

What God *does do*, however, is this: God gives us the way to get through suffering. In life, whether suffering or joyful, we are accompanied by Christ, and in that lies hope. In that lies redemption.

As we are accompanied by Christ, who himself knew suffering, in whom God experienced suffering, God's redemptive power allows suffering to be transformed. Karl Barth wrote, "Our suffering is no longer a passive, dangerous, poisonous, destructive tribulation and perplexity such as invade the souls of those who hate the judge, but is transformed into a tribulation and perplexity which are creative, fruitful, powerful, promising, by which [men] are dissolved, cast to the ground, pressed into a corner – and imprisoned – *by God*." ⁴

What Barth is saying is that *as we are being held by God*, redemption is happening.

Let me tell you about my friend Chris Hill. I preached Chris's ordination service a few years back and I attended her funeral a couple of weeks ago. As I was preaching Chris's ordination, I knew that I would return to Covenant Presbyterian Church where she was being ordained for her funeral in the not too distant future because as she was being

⁴ Karl Barth. The Epistle to the Romans. Oxford University Press, London, 1968, p156. Emphasis mine.

ordained, she knew that she had terminal cancer. She had a remarkable journey to ordination. She dropped out of Columbia Seminary after her diagnosis of stage 4 breast cancer, and Chris Henry told me years later that as she and her husband packed the car to return to Charlotte for treatment, she looked him straight in the eye and said, “We **will** be back.”

She did just that. She completed treatment in Charlotte, returned with her cancer in remission but certain to recur, completed her studies and was ordained.

The cancer returned with a vengeance.

But in her waning years, Chris worked as a chaplain at the Presbyterian Home in Charlotte. She made pastoral calls, conducted funerals, comforted the depressed and lonely, visited hospitals and did it all with her community of faith knowing what she was going through – indeed, truly I cannot imagine how much healing this wounded healer shared by sharing her sacred story with others.

Endurance produced character, character produced hope.

Character comes from how we interact with circumstances. Do we interact with circumstances as those who know that we are being held by God?

Or do we interact with circumstances as though what we do doesn’t matter?

Do we engage with the world as those whose lives are redeemed and being redeemed?

Or do we seek to live as entities unto ourselves, cut off from the needs of others?

How we answer these questions is the basis of character.

Those Harvard students were so concerned about appearing judgmental or holier than thou. Surely the church must share that concern.

But is there anything holier than thou about using good judgment to preserve a character that leads to hope?

Is there anything judgmental about declining to use someone else's body for pleasure to the detriment of their emotional well-being?

Is there anything "holier than thou" about declining to conduct business dealings in such a way that maximizes profits but at the cost of destroying community where a slightly less profitable alternative would preserve community?

Is there anything virtuous about taking the easier path if your character declines?

There is such a thing as the common good.

And it may be unfashionable to say so, but Christian faith dictates that we have a moral responsibility to use our character to shape that common good.

But if we are being held by God, think of the possibilities! Think of the hope!

So let me leave you as we started, with a little theology from Calvin and Hobbes. Calvin said, "Everybody seeks happiness! Not me, though! That's the difference between me and the rest of the world. Happiness isn't good enough for me! I demand euphoria!"

Sisters and brothers, let's dare to be different. Let's dare to demand more of ourselves, more than gratification – for the hope of the world.

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