

### *Truth and Action*

When David Brooks was interviewed by Audie Cornish about his book, *The Road to Character*, he made a rather surprising claim: Career success doesn't make you happy. He had one quote, though, that caused this preacher some consternation. He said, "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."<sup>1</sup>

It's not rocket science what a preacher wouldn't like about this. Any minister worth their salt better be preaching the *truth*, and be at least somewhat confident in it.

But here's why what Brooks said caught me: Whether I agree with him all the time or not, I consider him to be one of the most civil, courteous, and intelligent of columnists, and often give his viewpoint more than a little benefit of doubt *because* of his courtesy and civility. "Narcissistic" and "blowhard" aren't words that come to mind.

But Brooks wasn't just seeking to be self-deprecating, he was seeking to get to a deeper truth: What brings fulfillment?

He juxtaposes two dualling realities: A culture designed to make us feel more and more self-important against a culture that prizes *moral courage* and *character*.

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.

Into the Christian moral vocabulary, the author of 1 John sprinkles a couple of 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

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<sup>1</sup> NPR, April 13, 2015

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.'"<sup>2</sup>

What's so interesting to me is that Brooks is striving for almost the same thing that human beings with awareness of morality have struggled with 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, perhaps most pressing for those of us in the position to nurture children and young people, either because they are our own children or because we have made a vow to them at baptism.

Who among us would choose for anyone we love 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, spending the seconds, minutes, days, and years of their lives on, does not in the final analysis, seem to amount to much.

We want to be happy.

We want to be good.

We suspect, or at least *hope*, 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.

In an op-ed in the New York Times, Frank Bruni mused over this question. Bruni and his siblings had gone gambling with their father. It brought Bruni's father joy to get his family around him to play blackjack. So, he wrote, 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 spent his column reflecting on how his father changed after he was widowed, 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,

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. *emphasis mine*

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."<sup>3</sup>

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.

Perhaps you may wonder how a story about gambling illustrates goodness. God doles out endless goodness, and gambles on how we will use it.

Our actions can have many outcomes, so it leaves me wondering if whether they are good or not comes down to *motive*.

Actions may not make us good, but actions done with love may *be* good.

Action *can* be the expression of love.

But it is not guaranteed to be.

Let me give you one of my rare, simple litmus tests to apply in living a Christian life: If we're seriously asking what makes a good life, what makes a *fulfilled* life, and we're doing so from the vantage point of a Christian church, perhaps we might start with what makes us uniquely *Christian*.

Let me be clear: This does *not* mean that persons of other faiths don't frequently do good things. We know that people of other faiths frequently do good things, and do so from the vantage point of their faith.

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 Christ?

Or better yet, the ultimate litmus test: *Is this loving?*

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

That can be lived out as a generosity of spirit, that can be lived out as a genuine concern for the good of all creation, on such a day as this.

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 necessarily

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<sup>3</sup> Frank Bruni, *My Father's Secret* in The New York Times, April 15, 2015.

mean right now in the church pew; I hope that part at least is easy. I mean in the car, in the grocery aisle, in life at-large *engage in loving action*.

Sometimes the church is perceived as being more concerned with truth than it is with action. We are seen sometimes the martinets of the world with our eyes glued to the rule-books.

Jesus never set us up to be enforcers.

The church has been obsessed at times with the rules of faith, not the First Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia particularly, but the church generally. Hence Harvard sociologist Harvey Cox characterized the last epoch of church history, from Constantine 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 truth became, "Believe the right things, 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.*

But there must be a caution to the church whenever we say this: Let's not give the truth a makeover in our own image.

Let's not recast Jesus as a contemporary, but better, version of ourselves.

Joe Small warns of this temptation in, writing, "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."<sup>4</sup>

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 Christ.

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

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<sup>4</sup> Small, Joseph D. [The Preservation of the Truth](#). (Witherspoon: Louisville, 2005) pp20-21

We come here to follow the truth ourselves.

Which, for Christians, means following Jesus Christ.

We follow the person who *is* the truth.

And when we follow a person who is the truth, we safeguard ourselves against the whims of doctrine, culture, attitude, and bias.

Jesus, the good shepherd, is the truth of the 23<sup>rd</sup> 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 in the incarnation.

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.