

Feast of the Nativity of John the Baptist
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Vacationing abroad these last weeks, Claudia and I have been blessed to visit beautiful places. After a few days in northern Scotland, on Orkney, we took an Alpine tour, staying in charming villages and hiking through spectacular mountains. It was a dreamy trip, whose fairy-tale moment was a climb to bridge looking down over Neuschwanstein, King Ludwig II's fantasy palace in Bavaria, the model for Disney's Sleeping Beauty castle.

So I have been out of touch with the daily news. And it was a real shock--a heart break--to return and learn about the massacre at Emanuel African Methodist Church in Charleston on Wednesday. The pastor and eight parishioners were murdered by a young white man, simply because they were black. Yet another outrageous assault on African Americans in this country, this one was ruthlessly planned to violate the wellspring of that community's life: a worship gathering--a Bible study!--in an historic sanctuary.

We "whites"--members of the dominant culture--have so much work to do on ourselves. We can. We must.

I've been reading *The Road to Character* by David Brooks *NYTimes* op-ed columnist and commentator on NPR, etc. Many of you may enjoy his writing, especially his work as a social critic. *Bobos in Paradise* was a clever critique of the meritocracy in American culture. With *The Road to Character*, Brooks goes deeper in that critique.

This book is his midlife meditation on what really matters--the genre whose masterpiece is Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Although Brooks is a cultural Jew and writes nominally from a secular perspective, his writing in the book can be stirring: disarmingly spiritual. His chapter on Augustine, for instance, is so compelling that one commentator asked whether he had converted! Whatever the case, Brooks candidly admitted that he has written the book to save his own soul.

Brooks is at the top of his profession, himself a shining star of the meritocracy. At life's end, however, he wants to be remembered less for the externals--the achievements of his resume--than for the internals: his legacy as a human being, his character. The virtues of character he explores include honesty, integrity, humility, courage, commitment, self-knowledge, discipline, service to the common good. Brooks profiles about a dozen people whose lives are exemplars of those virtues. Some were people of faith, including St. Augustine and his mother Monica, Catholic-Worker founder Dorothy Day and Civil Rights elder A. Philip Randolph. Others were not, like President Eisenhower and the writers George Eliot and Samuel Johnson. A common thread he notes in their lives: "each started with a deep vulnerability and undertook a lifelong effort to transcend [it]". Each "traveled down the valley of humility in order to ascend to the heights of tranquility and self-respect".

There is much to mine in Brooks' book. On this Feast of John the Baptist, I want to highlight a central point: the role of community in the formation of character

Character **is** formed. It is not innate. It is created. Character is cultivated over decades--a lifetime, in fact. The creation, the cultivation, of character is grounded and most powerfully formed in community.

Character is formed in community. It always has been--for better or worse.

Honesty, integrity, humility, courage, commitment, self-knowledge and discipline, have been ideals in Western culture for millennia. The fruit of human wisdom, honored both by classical antiquity and Judaism--these values were foundational to Christian ethics and morality. They were also the dominant ideals of American culture from the outset. According to Brooks, that shifted in the 1950s and 1960s. Today those internal values have to compete ever more with external ones that American culture promotes. Some, like our idolization of celebrities, are easy to identify and decry. Other modern values, such as individualism, consumerism, and "achievement" are now, in Brooks' words, "out of balance".

Most of us want to have the time-honored qualities of character. We think we'd like to make the world a better place, and to have the inner life that will sustain us when the external one fails or passes away. We can't do it alone. Brooks tells his readers that "to live a decent life...to build up a soul" we need "to join a counterculture."

As members of this church, we have joined what should be that counterculture. When we are true to the teachings of Jesus, it is. Then church is the community we need, the community the nation needs to counter the unceasing demands to buy, to climb, to succeed, to be rich or famous, to be the center of our own universe--and, at the extreme end, the license to take justice in our own hands.

Church can and should be a crucible in which true character is forged for ourselves and our children. It can and should be a place where we can enter into our brokenness, share our vulnerabilities, encourage one another and grow: to strengthen ourselves, our families, our cities, our country.

Church gives us historic exemplars of character in the lives of the saints. Like the people David Brooks' profiled, saints were ordinary people whose greatness arose out of the transformation of their weaknesses. Peter's cowardice transformed into courage, Thomas' doubt into belief, the woman at the well's skeptical curiosity and reticence into fervent evangelism. None of the saints had an easy road, and many may have been really hard to live with--like our own John the Baptist. Still John is an outstanding example of character, of courage, humility, and commitment. He laid aside his privileged birthright to follow God's call as a solitary ascetic, and a courageous prophet. The saints encourage us to confront our signal weaknesses of character and work with God's grace to transform them.

Church community also gives us **living** examples of character in our midst. St. John's has a rich history of character (and characters!)--more than a century's worth. A relatively recent and important episode was the courageous decision not to close down this parish thirty-plus years ago. Ask the Bremners, Hawkinsons, Crandalls, Mary Miller, Vicki Madsen, Lorraine Meskin, Riskens, LeRoy Rice, Brandts, Jeanne Olson, the Barbers about that. While you're at it, thank them and see if you can't learn more about what formed their character. Those same people with their rector, our Emeritus Bob Harvey, anchored St. John's in the social justice work that we still hold dear.

That brings us back to the enduring issue of racial inequality and injustice--particularly in our own city. The struggle for equality and justice is at the core of Judeo-Christian identity and values. Jesus stood for the victims of injustice and called his followers to do the same. It is the work that all of us are called to do.

St. John's food and shelter ministries have long addressed the **effects** of racial injustice. We can't stop there. A year ago we began Facing Race: examining our own beliefs, histories, and attitudes. This summer we continue. Rie Gilsdorf is leading discussions of a book called *Courageous Conversations*. Join us! Righting the egregious wrongs, the shameful history of slavery and racial discrimination is vital, holy, character-building work in which every one of us cannot, **must**--have a part.

In his classic memoir *Soul on Ice*, Black power-activist and writer Eldridge Cleaver wrote, "If you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem." It was true then, in 1968. It is true today. To develop the inner life we want, to leave this world a better place, to have the character worthy of our faith, each of us is called to be part of the solution.