

Jon Hauerwas – May 29, 2016 – “Community of Character”

I once saw an episode of “Modern Family” where the oldest daughter was applying to college. And as a part of that process, she needed to write an essay about a time in her life that she had overcome adversity, and ultimately, what that experience had taught her. The only problem is that she couldn’t think of anything to say. So, full of frustration and teenage angst, she took it out on her mother.

“Mom,” she began. “My friends have all had to overcome something, and their essays are great. But my life has been so sheltered that I have nothing to write about.” If you’ve ever watched the show, then you know about the ongoing tension between this daughter and her mother. And, as usual, the mother’s response was immediate. “Well, I’m so sorry that your life has been so perfect.” An eye roll and a huff followed, before the daughter stormed off to the other room.

In the midst of this family spat about parenting styles and the sorts of lessons that are passed along from one generation to the next was a commentary about what it means to build character. And as I think about that, it strikes me that what we find in this sitcom really isn’t so different from what Paul was saying in his letter to the Romans.

Here, he writes that “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.” In other words, it is adversity which strengthens us. Yes. As we learn to face and then successfully navigate the various challenges of our lives, we begin to build the kind of confidence and character which then propel us forward to the next pressing issue of concern.

Now there is, of course, a distinction between theory and practice. Theory involves the more intellectual, academic pursuits, which if they are to be of any value, ought to be tested. That’s what the Enlightenment taught us, and also where practice comes in.

Yes. It is often in the context of our daily experiences when our theories are put to the test. Character, then, is developed not through the study of theory, but by the experience or practice of it. Character is formed in the process of getting our hands dirty. Of facing adversity. Or, as Paul puts it, “suffering,” which produces endurance and serves as a building block in the formation of life-giving character.

As you already know very well, this is Memorial Day weekend – the time each year when we pause both to remember and to celebrate the lives of all those

who have died while ensuring our Constitutional freedoms. What an awesome and powerful image that is for us, the Christian church, as we gather each week to both remember and celebrate the life of Christ. The one who willingly laid down his own life for both the righteous and the unrighteous among us. For him, as for all those whom we remember this day, the similarities are boundless. Laying down one's life for the sake of others.

And once again, at the center of all of this is character. Character fashioned through experience. Tested with endurance. And shaped through practice. It's just as Paul described it.

To switch gears for a moment here, I once went to play golf with a friend, another pastor. I had just parked my car and was talking to my friend when a woman pulled in beside us. She had been listening to the news on her radio and wanted to make small talk. So she began a conversation with us about one of the many tragedies in the headlines that day before asking, rhetorically, "Can you believe it? I mean, what should we do with these people?" She was referring, of course, to those who had perpetuated the unsavory behavior of the day.

I knew, of course, that she wasn't searching for an answer – only solidarity, or some encouragement, perhaps, that there are still good people in the world. There was a time in my life when I was more reserved. When I would simply nod in agreement, acknowledge the difficulty of the situation, and say that it was hard to understand what could motivate someone to do such an awful thing to another. But now, I don't worry much about sounding too preachy. When you do what I do for a living, it's hard to be anything else.

“What should we do with these guys?” she said, rhetorically. I didn't hesitate. “We should send them to church,” I countered. At first, she was speechless. Clearly, my response had taken her off guard. Then, after a brief pause, I turned to my pastor friend and smiled before the stranger finally conceded my point. “Well, that's a good start,” she said.

That day, I wasn't looking for an opportunity to profess my faith in God. I was enjoying some time off. But, when that moment arose, I was able to profess my deep conviction in the power of Christian community to build character and to transform lives. If I did not believe this much, then I could not stand before you as an authentic witness to the Gospel week in and week out.

Yes. In the end, it is not theory or right belief which holds transformative power in our lives. That's only the beginning. To be truly transformed, we must practice and profess what we claim to believe. And, as Christians, the most obvious place for us to do this is within a community of character which gives us both the space and the structure to experience the life of faith in all of its joys and despite the presence of many sorrows.

To think otherwise – to believe that we can be Christians without the church – is to be like a high school student who wants to write a college admission essay before realizing that she doesn't have the right tools to get the job done. Certainly, she understands the question and the theory behind it, but she's never been forced to put her beliefs into practice and she's never been held accountable.

You've likely heard it said that character is what we do when no one else is looking, which may be another way of saying that belief needs to be nourished. So I'll leave you this morning with this thought. There was a long-time church member who once remarked that even though he had attended church regularly for many years, he couldn't remember a single sermon. This led him to wonder aloud to a close friend if this meant that the church wasn't really shaping him as he had hoped.

His friend thought about the comment before replying, “You know, my wife has been cooking dinner for me for decades. And if you asked me right now, I probably couldn’t give you a complete menu that she has served from all of our time together. But, I do know that she has nourished me and that she has made me whole.”

Today, through the sacrament of baptism, we have welcome two new children into our community of character. In the weeks, months, and years ahead, I ask you to remember your promise to teach them and help them to understand what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. And to those graduates we recognized this morning, I offer you this charge. No one is called to do it alone. Even Jesus wouldn’t. So I encourage you to seek out the Christian community wherever you may be and lean to into adversity with the knowledge that “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.”

May it be so and all thanks be to God both now and forever. Amen.