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Why Baptist?

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Principle 5 of the Alliance of Baptists: "Theological education in congregations, colleges, and seminaries characterized by reverence for biblical authority and respect for open inquiry and responsible scholarship"

I was about 8-years-old on what turned out to be my very last day of Sunday School at the church in which I was christened. I raised my hand for what must have been the 10th time to ask the teacher yet another question about the Bible story or the church or the lesson or maybe even the world in general. More than 30 years later, I feel for her. I've been in that exasperated place. I'm sure she was an overworked, under-thanked volunteer who had been faithfully teaching the children's Sunday School class for years. She had been equipped only with a paper folder containing prescribed lessons and a few portraits of blue eyed Jesus or smiling, community helpers. She didn't sign on for my questions, and I really do empathize. But that day, I was 8 and didn't have any perspective. So what I recall vividly was the way she rolled her eyes far back into her head and then placed her hands in her lap atop the lesson's cardstock portrait. She closed her eyes and took a beat before opening them again to say, "Elizabeth, Sunday School is a time to listen to a story. Sunday School is not a time to ask questions." And as I retold this story over lunch that day back in my home, my parents' experience had been similar to my own. And so they decided the time had come for us to leave that church and join the Baptists.

More than 30 years later, now a parent, I live with an 8-year-old girl who raises her hand at least 10 times during any story. Actually, to be honest, she probably just goes headfirst into wondering aloud without raising her hand and waiting for permission to speak. My Julia asks a lot of questions. She asks questions about how things work and why things are the way they are. She asks questions about space and basketball and fashion and gymnastics and pranks and dessert and competition. Her questions are almost always linked to action which adds a layer of complexity and fatigue for the adults tasked with caring for and teaching this curious, determined, and creative 2nd grade thinker.

A question about how to make slime is almost immediately followed by climbing the kitchen counters and pulling supplies down out of the cabinets. A question about how to compete in the Olympics will likely lead to emptying her closets and the backyard shed of costumes, sports equipment, and lawn games to set up an elaborate series of competitions for family and neighbors to run through the events. A question about a popular YouTube channel will invariably end with recording her own toy reviews or American Girl doll suggestions with a follow-up question about how to set up a YouTube channel.

Most recently, she's asked a series of questions about why boys get to have more sports experiences than girls. And why do the boys at school say girls aren't as good as they are. And why don't women get to play football like men. And why do only boys sign up for the basketball program at school. And why can't a woman do all the things a man does. And why can't a woman be president of the United States. The conversations in our house are interesting, to say the least, and frequent, to state the obvious. This line of questioning about gender and sports and leadership and equality led to a bit of a gender-norm strike on Julia's part which was uncharacteristic for her. For at least two months, maybe three, she refused to wear skirts or dresses for any occasion because boys don't have to do that. And she preferred to wear her hair under a baseball cap because boys do that all the time, too. She wanted to be known, at school in particular, for being just as tough and just as strong and just as capable as all of the boys.

Her fashion strike was rooted not in gender identity and presentation but in an 8-year-old's sense of justice that started with some good questions posed first at home, and then she took her good questions to her teachers and school leaders. Without hesitation, she stood before those grown-ups and asked: Why do the boys say I can't play as hard as they do? And why isn't there basketball for girls? And why is the world this way? I am grateful to say she attends one of the many amazing New Orleans Charter schools that makes room for the questions of children and takes seriously the thoughts, emotions, and passions they bring. One school administrator, in particular, latched onto these questions and made remarkable space for Julia and for me to sit and talk about gender, equality, equity, and justice. He sat with her late one afternoon and pulled up videos of WNBA stars to show her images of strong, powerful women using their bodies to run and shoot and dominate in their sport. He listened to my questions about how to best support my

daughter and foster dialogue in the school, and he is now creating an opportunity for girls to have their very own basketball team beginning this fall. Moving onto her next challenge, as she always does, Julia now very much hopes they will also accept her team name suggestion—the Bricolage Fireballs. She has a fire in her, to be sure, and it is a privilege to learn from this bold young woman.

I studied Baptist Heritage with Phyllis Rodgerson Pleasants, and read her book *Freedom for the Journey* as part of our required seminary study of Baptist ancestors. I flipped through that book recently, looking over the stories of the Baptist parents whose legacies live on in my work. I thought immediately of my daughter as I read again of Ann Hasseltine Judson, a spirited young woman who challenged and did not accept the expectations and norms of her day, refusing to stay home and embrace the domestic arts and choosing international ministry alongside her husband instead. We could spend the rest of the afternoon naming the women and men who have taught us to change the landscape of the world simply by asking, “Why?” Their good questions led to inspired and informed action.

I am fortunate to serve a congregation that values this heritage. In my first years of pastoring the St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church, I did what many new pastors do and invited the congregation into a time of articulating a shared vision and identity. Over and over again, alongside the priorities of dignified worship, strong preaching, and social action, people spoke of valuing a place in which any question was valid. Several members spoke of Dr. Lanny Goldfinch, the civil rights activist and perpetual curmudgeon who would vote against most anything in a church business meeting, regardless of his actual opinion, just to make sure there was always a dissenting voice on record. He sarcastically lamented that St. Charles was the only church that would never kick him out no matter how heretical his comments, ideas, and questions were. As we narrowed down phrases, we landed on a shared value not of finding answers but of asking questions because that process is open, forever evolving, and might lead us to various conclusions rather than just one.

At the end of this process, we affirmed together that at St. Charles Avenue we aspire to honor God by Asking Questions, Seeking Justice, Loving Neighbors, and Welcoming All. Writers like Tillich and Buechner, role models like Ann, Lanny, and

Julia have taught me: The vibrant curiosity of a good question is a powerful tool and not a problem to be feared. Likewise, it's not enough to toss questions out into the ether and then call it a day. As Richard Rohr teaches, We need to chase after truth together in such a way that we are moving toward enlightened awareness. Like my curious daughter, we need to ask questions that lead us to act. Like St. Charles, we need to ask questions and embrace a wisdom that more fully enables us to seek justice, love neighbors, and welcome all. And when we're talking about asking good questions in the church, we need to ask the ones that lead us to deconstruct what desperately needs to be taken apart and then continue working with our questions as we put the better and truer thing back together again.

This is what you, my friends and professors and pastors and colleagues, continue teaching me through the brilliant work you are doing in each of your contexts. You are showing me all the time how your wildly curious imaginations inspire the remarkable work you are doing in the world in Jesus' name. Thank you. Keep showing the world how it's done. I, for one, and deeply grateful.