

July 18, 2021

Some Questions To Think About

Texts: **Luke 18: 15-17; Mark 9: 14-29; “Jesus and Questions”**, by Otis Moss III

It’s sometimes said that a childlike faith is the best kind of faith. Probably this idea comes from the time we just heard about, when Jesus took a little child and put the child into the middle of the group of the disciples and said, “Unless you become like a little child, you can never receive the kingdom of God.”

But the question is, what does that mean, to become like a little child? Older commentaries tend to assume that children simply accept the world as it is presented to them by their parents. Whatever the benevolent adult says the children simply accept. In the same way, it is assumed that whatever God or the Bible or the church says is something that we should just accept. As a parent, however, I want to say that this is not at all the way that children work. They do not simply accept whatever you tell them. Instead, they ask more questions:

“Put your boots on, it’s raining.”

“But why do I have to put my boots on?”

“So your feet don’t get wet.”

“Why shouldn’t my feet get wet?”

“So you don’t catch a cold.”

“What if I *do* catch a cold?”

“Then you would have to stay home sick and miss school.”

“Would that be so bad? If I wear my boots out, so I won’t get sick, can I still stay home from school tomorrow for a mental health day?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

It quickly gets exhausting. But kids have questions. They don’t just accept whatever you say. They poke and prod at your answers. They ask the same question again, hoping for a different response. They want to know about situations, like will your answer change if it’s the weekend. They compare similar situations to their own: “Well, Becky’s mom let’s her have a cell phone.” Sometimes our answers aren’t that great on our first try at them, so we have to try again with a different tack. One time, when I was demanding what I thought was justice, my dad let down the wall and said, “You know, sometimes parents aren’t that interested in justice. They just want peace and quiet!”

So children and questions are complicated, and so are our answers!

A childlike faith is surely a faith that is surely just like that too, then: always inquisitive, always trying to learn more, always testing whether the answer they just got is completely accurate, or whether it only applies in this special case, seeking to understand the justice of what is going on, sometimes failing to see the bigger picture! It’s only by asking questions that our faith can grow. So I want to approach a few questions now that have come up recently in my life in the next few weeks. I think it’s good to explore our faith through asking questions.

The question for today comes from an exchange I had with someone on Twitter, another Christian. He casually mentioned that Christian faith believes that people are bad, that our underlying nature is evil.

He was utterly convinced that it's a tenet of Christian faith that people are bad. He couldn't believe that any Christian would hold any other view. That was very interesting to me, because my view is the very opposite of that. I believe that humans are very good, full of worth on their own, but that we are also fallen, which means that sometimes we sin despite our good nature. So there's the question for today: Are people basically good, or are people basically evil?

How would we go about answering that question? For me, it's about the Bible on the one hand, and about my experience of life as a guide on the other. So let's look at that question for a minute.

After the creation of humankind in the Bible on the sixth day, God doesn't just say that what God has created is good, as God did on the other days. God says that it's *very good*. That pushes us towards humans as good. God says that humans are made in God's own image. If that's so, whatever that means, it must mean that we are not evil, because God isn't evil. We must be good, as God is good.

If we are evil, then God created evil. That can't be right! God doesn't make evil. On that the Christian tradition is united. Psalm 8 says that humans are made a little lower than angels, and Hebrews 2 repeats that claim. That puts us right around the hierarchy of heavenly beings! That sounds pretty good!

More than that, God doesn't give up on us and just write us off, but continually tries to redeem us because we are so valuable. We get the revelation to Abraham, the law given to Moses, the call of the prophets, and finally God takes on flesh and comes to redeem us through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. That sounds pretty good to me, pretty valuable!

On the other side, Genesis 6:5 does say that early on, the inclination of the human heart was only wickedness all the time. This comes from the flood narrative, a narrative that was heavily influenced by the Babylonian version of the flood myth. In that one, the god Ea sends a flood to destroy humans, because they are making so much noise that the gods can't sleep. But one man named Utnapishtim is spared with his family. This turns out to be a good thing, because the Babylonian gods can't survive without humans feeding them, a point Ea forgot. But the whole Biblical flood story has little to do with the rest of the Bible story, and was clearly put in Genesis during the time of the Babylonian captivity of Israel (as a counter narrative to the Ea/Utnapishtim story). We shouldn't rely on it as our basis for who humans are.

Psalm 64 says humans are cunning in plotting injustice. That may be true in that a lot of people have spent a lot of time trying to get one over on someone, but in my version, those are good people who are acting out in fallen ways, not completely evil people acting out their best selves. In Romans and elsewhere, Paul talks about how the will of the flesh is for the baser things. That does sound pretty bad. But humans are more than just flesh. We are spirit, too, and our spirit longs for God and for doing what is good. Even if the flesh is fallen, it isn't all of us, or even most of us.

So we can agree with Paul that humans in the flesh sometimes wish for baser things, but we can also say that humans aren't just flesh, we are also spirit, striving upwards to God. You can't judge what we really are from just one part of us!

And let's talk about it from the side of personal experience, too. It's not like we are aliens observing humans from the outside. We actually are humans, so we can look inside. I would ask you to look inside yourself: is your inclination towards wickedness all the time? Is that how you experience yourself? I sure don't. I find that my inclination is towards good almost all the time. I'm not perfect, but I don't think I ever consciously will evil. I want to do what's right. I want to help other people. I'm distressed when I see injustice. I'm angered when I see racism, or sin, or homophobia, or sexism, or the exploitation of other people. I want to stop that and make it better for everyone, so that all people can live their fullest lives. I'm sure you are like that, too. If I do wrong, I kind of stumble into doing the wrong thing, more than charge headlong into it.

So I'd want to say that the Bible and experience say that we are basically good, but fallen, and so not perfect. We can do bad things, but doing a bad thing is very different from being a bad creation. What we do and what we are can be very different things.

If we just are bad, then God made us that way, and who can blame us for being what we were made to be? But if we are good, but doing bad things sometimes, then we are responsible for our actions, and there is the possibility of changing. If we are good, then not doing good things means we are falling short of who we are.

I think it matters whether we believe people are basically good or basically bad in how we treat other people. If we think they are basically bad, then the problem is to constrain them, to stop them from doing the bad things they want to do all the time. We approach others with suspicion and mistrust. We view them as potentially scheming against us, because their hearts are so wicked. If they are really wicked, we might even write them off, and think of them as worthless, something to be gotten rid of.

But if people are basically good, we approach them completely differently. We see people who are doing something wrong, and we want to rescue them out of it, help them see that it's wrong, get them back on the right track. If people are basically good creations of God, we can never write them off or be done with them. We want to join in God's work of redemption, helping others. We take people as being incredibly valuable, and worth working with together, and we try to figure out how to make the best world possible. It matters whether people are basically good or basically bad.

I come down firmly on the side of good, but fallen, and needing redemption - which, thank God, we have available to us in Jesus Christ.

So, my good friends, come now to this table where God meets us in the bread and the wine, and celebrate how God has picked us up when we were fallen, and restored us again to the goodness of our creation.

Amen