

Rotheiser: Anchoring ourselves within God's goodness

What would Jesus do? For some Christians, that's the easy answer to every question. In every situation all we need to ask is: What would Jesus do?

At a deep level, that's actually true. Jesus is the ultimate criterion. He is the way, the truth, and the life and anything that contradicts him is not a way to God.

Yet, I suspect, many of us find ourselves irritated in how that expression is often used in simplistic ways, as a fundamentalism difficult to digest. Sometimes, in our irritation at this, we spontaneously want to say: Jesus has nothing to do with this! But, of course, as soon as those words escape our mouths we realize how bad that sounds! Jesus has a lot to do with every theological, ecclesial, or liturgical question, no matter its complexity.

Granted, there's the danger of fundamentalism here; but it's equally as dangerous to answer theological, ecclesial, and liturgical questions without considering what Jesus might do. He's still, and forever, a non-negotiable criterion.

But while Jesus is a non-negotiable criterion, he's not a simplistic one.

What did Jesus do? Well, the answer isn't simple. Looking at his life we see that sometimes he did things one way, sometimes another way, and sometimes he started out doing something one way and ended up changing his mind and doing it in a different way, as we see in his interaction with the Syro-Phoenician woman. That's why, I suspect, within Christianity there are so many different denominations, spiritualities, and ways of worship, each with its own interpretation of Jesus. Jesus is complex.

Given Jesus' complexity, it's no accident then that theologians, preachers, and spiritualities often find in his person and his teachings ways that reflect more how they would handle a situation than how he would. We see this in our churches and spiritualities everywhere, and I say this with sympathy, not with judgment.

None of us gets Jesus fully right.

So where does this leave us? Do we simply rely on our private interpretation of Jesus? Do we give ourselves over uncritically to some ecclesial or academic authority and trust that it will tell us what Jesus would do in every situation? Is there a "third" way?

Well, there's a "third" way, the way of most Christian denominations, wherein

we submit our private interpretation to the canonical (“dogmatic”) tradition of our particular church and accept, though not in blind, uncritical, obedience, the interpretation of that larger community, its longer history, and its wider experience, humbly accepting that it can be naïve (and arrogant) to bracket 2000 years of Christian experience so as to believe that our insight into Jesus is a needed corrective to a vision that has inspired so many millions of people through so many centuries.

Still, we’re not meant to park the dictates of our private conscience, our critical questions, our unease with certain things, and the wounds we carry, at our church door either.

In the end, we all must be true to our own consciences, faithful to the particular insights that God graces us with, and mindful of the wounds we carry. Both our graces and our wounds are meant to be listened to and they, along with the deepest voices within our conscience, need to be taken into account when ask ourselves: What would Jesus do?

We need to answer that for ourselves by faithfully holding and carrying within us the tension between being obedient to our churches and not betraying the critical voices within our own conscience. If we do that honestly, one thing will eventually constellate inside us as an absolute: God is good!

Everything Jesus taught and incarnated was predicated on that truth. Anything that jeopardizes or belies that, be it a church, a theology, a liturgical practice, or a spirituality is wrong. And any voice within dogma or private conscience that betrays that is also wrong.

How we conceive of God colours for good or for bad everything within our religious practice. And above all else, Jesus revealed this about God: God is good. That truth needs to ground everything else, our churches, our theologies, our spiritualities, our liturgies, and our understanding of everyone else.

Sadly, often it doesn’t.

The fear that God is not good disguises itself in subtle ways but is always manifest whenever our religious teachings or practices somehow make God in heaven not as understanding, merciful, and indiscriminate and unconditional in love as Jesus was on earth. It’s also manifest whenever we fear that we’re dispensing grace too cheaply and making God too accessible.

Sadly, the God who is met in our churches today is often too-narrow, too-merciless, too-tribal, too-petty, and too-untrustworthy to be worthy of Jesus ... or the surrender of our soul.

What would Jesus do?

Admittedly the question is complex. However we know we have the wrong answer whenever we make God anything less than fully good, whenever we set conditions

for unconditional love, and whenever, however subtly, we block access to God and God's mercy.