

Rotheiser: What kind of house can you build for me?

What's right and what's wrong? We fight a lot over moral issues, often with a self-assured righteousness. And mostly we fall into that same self-righteousness whenever we argue about sin. What constitutes a sin and what makes for a serious sin? Different Christian denominations and different schools of thought within them lean on various kinds of biblical and philosophical reasoning in trying to sort this out, often bitterly disagreeing with each other and provoking more anger than consensus.

Partly that's to be expected since moral questions must take into account the mystery of human freedom, the limitations inherent in human contingency, and the bewildering number of existential situations that vary from person to person. It's not easy in any given situation to tell what's right and what's wrong, and even more difficult to tell what's sinful and what's not.

Intending no offense to how our churches and moral thinkers have classically approached moral questions, I believe there's a better way to approach them that, more healthily, takes into account human freedom, human limitations, and the singular existential situation of every individual. The approach isn't my own, but one voiced by the Prophet Isaiah who offers us this question from God: *What kind of house can you build for me?* (Isaiah 66, 1) That question should undergird our overall discipleship and all of our moral choices.

What kind of house can you build for me? Men and women of faith have generally taken this literally, and so from ancient times to this very day have built magnificent temples, shrines, churches, and cathedrals to show their faith in God. That's wonderful, but the invitation Isaiah voices is, first and foremost, about the kind of house we're meant to build inside ourselves. How do we enshrine the image and likeness of God inside our body, our intellect, our affectivity, our actions? What kind of "church" or "cathedral" is our very person? That's the deeper question in terms of moral living.

Beyond a very elementary level, our moral decision-making should no longer be guided by the question of right or wrong, is this sinful or not? Rather it should be guided and motivated by a higher question: *What kind of house can you build for me?* At what level do I want to live out my humanity and my discipleship? Do I want to be more self-serving or more generous? Do I want to be petty or noble? Do I want to be self-pitying or big of heart? Do I want to live out my commitments in a fully honest fidelity or am I comfortable betraying others and myself in hidden ways? Do I want to be a saint or am I okay being mediocre?

At a mature level of discipleship (and human maturity) the question is no longer, is this right or wrong? That's not love's question. Love's question is

rather, how can I go deeper? At what level can I live out love, truth, light, and fidelity in my life?

Allow me a simple, earthy example to illustrate this. Consider the issue of sexual chastity: is masturbation wrong and sinful? I once heard a moral professor take a perspective on this which reflects the challenge of Isaiah. Here, in a paraphrase, is how he framed the issue: "I don't believe it's helpful to contextualize this question as did the classical moral theology texts, by saying it's a grave disorder and seriously sinful. Nor do I believe that it's helpful to say what our culture and much of contemporary psychology is saying, that it's morally indifferent. I believe that a more helpful way to approach this is not to look at it through the prism of right or wrong, sinful or not. Rather, ask yourself this: at what level do I want to live? At what level do I want to carry my chastity, my fidelity, and my honesty? At what point in my life do I want to accept carrying more of the tension that both my discipleship and my humanity ask of me? What kind of person do I want to be? Do I want to be someone who is fully transparent or someone who has hidden goods under the counter? Do I want to live in full sobriety?" What kind of "temple" do I want to be? *What kind of house can I build for God?*

This, I believe, is the ideal way we should stand before the moral choices in our lives. Granted, this isn't a spirituality for persons whose moral development is so weak or impaired that they are struggling still with the more fundamental demands of the Ten Commandments. Such persons need remedial and therapeutic help, and that's a different (though needed) task.

And one further point, this moral choice comes to us, as do all the invitations from God, as an invitation, not as a threat. It's through love and not threat that God invites us into life and discipleship, always gently asking us: *what kind of house can you build for me?*