

Are people good? (Mark 10:17-31)

We are worthy, loved, and enough. But so is everyone else.

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Last month, within the span of two days I heard two churchgoing people declare that people are “basically good.” First, a young adult, who explained to me that greed could be eliminated if “there was no such thing as 10 million dollars.” Second, a lady with curly white hair, who added that she thinks including confession and the assurance of pardon in Sunday worship is “overdoing” things.

As for me, I am all too aware of human sin: in my own life, the news cycle, and human history. We are born greedy, it seems to me, before we even know what money is. And I feel cheated when there’s no confession and assurance of grace in a Sunday service.

Jesus declares to the rich young man, “no one is good but God alone.” For 21st-century people, these are harsh words. We are taught by parents, teachers, and pretty much all of popular culture to believe that each of us is worthy, special, loved, and enough. I believe, in contrast, that it is true and useful *also* to see ourselves as flawed, ordinary, struggling, and sometimes a pain in the neck. We express love and beauty and also selfishness and cruelty, pretty much on a daily basis.

Babies are born hungry and, let’s be honest, self-centered—inclined toward their own survival. This is natural, but not “basically good.” We are biologically programmed to be selfish, maybe even greedy. We are made in God’s image, but we

are divided from our Creator and from one another, in individual bodies with individual needs. We are also born with individual talents, insights, and loves. Our self-limited, unique individuality is the gift and curse of human life.

Recently, I was in a study group struggling with the idea of Christian humility as taught by Benedict of Nursia in his rule for monks: a monk must believe “he is inferior to all.” What kind of wisdom is that, exactly? Especially for women and others who are so often treated as “less than” by our society’s norms and institutions? Even for someone like me, who doesn’t believe in the normative goodness of humanity, it is hard to see the use of believing that everyone else is better than me.

On the other hand, I believe it is important for all of us to know we are loved by God. Before God, we are worthy, loved, and enough; however, as Christians it’s also important for us to see that *everyone else is also* worthy, loved, and enough. This is how we live in community. [Joan Chittister offers this interpretation of Benedict’s hard words for modern ears](#): “Unless we see ourselves as potentially weaker, potentially more sinful, potentially more confused than anyone around us, how can we possibly understand and accept them? If we make ourselves the norm of society, who else can ever meet our standards?”

When I was a parish priest, in order to love my parishioners better I tried to find things they could do that I couldn’t, especially things I struggled with. I played a game with myself: What gifts does this parishioner have that I don’t? How can I admire and be thankful for them? Seeing how someone else was “better than me” showed me how to feel grateful for them, which both redeemed the difficult parts of their personality and reminded me that I am part of a larger whole.

There is a story about a Hasidic rabbi who carried two slips of paper, one in each pocket. On one he wrote, “For my sake the world was created.” On the other, “I am but dust and ashes.” Both are true, and both can be channels for God’s love and redemption in our lives. Humility reminds us that we need each other and that we need God, and that God loves us regardless of our goodness.