

Exploring Progressive Christianity 5
Chinese Proverb
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Will my dog, Pepper, be in heaven? What about my cat, Snowball? Will there be cavemen? These were the questions asked by Bart Simpson's Sunday School classmates in a Simpson's episode. According to the teacher, we will not find Pepper, Snowball, or cavemen in heaven. Bart had a question too, "What if you are a really good person and you're in a really bad fight and your leg gets gangrene and has to be amputated, will it be waiting for you in heaven? The teacher's reply, "For the last time, Bart, yes." Children, even animated ones, have a lot of questions. Being curious is a good thing; it's how we learn.

About 13 years ago, Christian Piatt, a ministry colleague, wrote a series of books called *Banned Questions*. The titles of the books are: *Banned Questions About the Bible*, *Banned Questions About Jesus*, and *Banned Questions About Christians*. The introduction in each book is the same. It begins with a story from Piatt's childhood that was the impetus for the series. He writes, "When I was younger, I had a Bible thrown at my head for asking too many questions during a Sunday School class. Granted, I was probably even more provocative than your average adolescent, but I really did have a lot of legitimate questions about God, my faith, Jesus, and the Bible. The message I got at the time was that the church isn't the place for such questions."

A Bible upside the head will do that, I guess, but today's Progressive Christianity Core Value says otherwise.

[We] Find grace in the search for understanding and believe there is more value in questioning with an open mind and open heart, than in absolutes or dogma.

If I had written this core value, I probably wouldn't have used the word grace because it is a word that gets thrown around a lot in the Christian tradition and it's also one we struggle to define from a theological perspective. It's like we need to use the word grace to define it. Before we dive into what grace is, I want to mention that the idea of divine grace is part of many religions and traditions. Grace isn't just for people who identify as Christians. The grace that exists in the world is for everyone, regardless of where you think it comes from.

Grace from a non-theological perspective is pretty straightforward. It is kindness with a dose of politeness. You extend grace to the waitress who forgets to bring you ketchup for your fries. You let a driver change lanes in front of you as his lane ends. Grace is nice and it's courteous. Grace from a theological perspective is less surface-y. Theologically, grace is the way divine love impacts our lives. As I said, Christians didn't invent grace. For example, in Hebrew, the closest word to the theological

concept of grace is “hesed.” Hesed is the unmerited favor of God and that definition is usually followed by a word salad that includes mercy, love, compassion, and grace.

From a Christian perspective, grace is given, not earned, and cannot be taken away. It dwells with you and is a part of you. Grace inspires you to love and inspires others to love you. Divine grace is what allows us to extend grace to other people. In her book, *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott says “[grace] is unearned love---the love that goes before, that greets us on the way. It’s the help you receive when you have no bright ideas left when you are empty and desperate and have discovered that your best thinking and most charming charm have failed you. Grace is the light or electricity or juice or breeze that takes you from that isolated place and puts you with others who are as startled or embarrassed and eventually as grateful as you are to be there.”¹ In terms of today’s Core Value, we ask the big questions and come face to face with that loving force that is at work in our lives and in the world. That force is grace. Grace is found while we are just trying to figure things out.

The reason it’s important to make this point is that so many of us were taught that asking theological questions at church shows a lack of faith. We were taught that if the minister or Sunday School teacher says it, it must be true. So, your pet won’t be in heaven, but your amputated leg will be. Got it. When we did ask a question at church, very often the response was, “That’s where faith comes in. You just have to believe.” The fact that we were asking questions and getting non-answers made some of feel like there was something wrong with us. But really we should have been encouraged to bring our questions to the community of faith. We should not have been made to feel ashamed or stupid. My experience has been that people get testy about questions because they don’t know the answers. “Just have faith,” is a cop out. “I don’t know, let’s think about it together,” is not.

As Lamott suggests, communities are supposed to be safe places to figure things out, safe places to ask questions. That applies to all kinds of communities---churches, schools, book clubs, and friend groups. There is a Chinese Proverb that says, “He who asks a question remains a fool for five minutes. He who does not ask remains a fool forever.” This proverb addresses the vulnerability we feel when we ask a question, especially in spaces we aren’t sure are safe. Will people think I’m dumb? Will they think I don’t believe what I’m supposed to believe?

I belong to a Facebook group for women in and around Bartlesville. One function of the group is to get answers to questions like, “Can anyone recommend a good doctor?” Or, “Which realtor should I use?” Occasionally, someone asks a bigger question. That happened this weekend. Someone, who is deeply mourning a loss, asked if her loved one was in heaven and if her loved one remains the same age she was in heaven or if she aged. I couldn’t stop reading the answers. One of the answers was particularly

¹ Lamott, Anne, *Traveling Mercies*, (Anchor Books: New York, 1999), 139.

interesting. One woman said that she had read that since Jesus died when he was 33, everyone in heaven is 33. Another woman said that she had read that as well.

I finally couldn't stand it anymore and I replied, "It doesn't matter what anyone else believes. What matters is what you believe. Nobody knows for sure. You believe what brings you peace and comfort." I was proud of the original questioner. How hard that must have been to ask such a vulnerable question. We don't like to admit when we don't know something, especially if we perceive that we should know the thing. That's why it is so important for us to cultivate a safe space for all questions. Asking also questions takes time. Jumping to conclusions or just blindly accepting what we've been told is much faster and way easier.

According to experts, it can be difficult for people who have been raised taking standardized tests to use their curiosity and ask questions. We, who are products of schools that require standardized testing have been rewarded for answering questions correctly and not so much for asking the right questions. I think I have mentioned before that I have a friend who is a college professor. He's about my age, so he has seen a lot of students come and go. He says the biggest change he has seen in incoming freshmen over the years is that students don't come to college knowing how to think. They come able to memorize and able to follow directions, but they haven't been taught, or rather encouraged, to think for themselves. He finds that students want step-by-step instructions and don't want to discover "the best way" for themselves.

I've wondered lately if this lack of encouragement to ask questions has contributed to the flow of false information that has flooded our lives (and subsequently to the division that exists in Bartlesville and our nation). When we read something or hear something, do we ask questions before we pass it along? Do we try to understand what's really going on?

This weekend a seminary friend made a Facebook post saying that Starbucks sponsored the Republican National Convention, so she said that if that isn't your brand of politics, you should find somewhere else to drink coffee. Politics aside, I am not doing that. Life is not worth living without Starbucks. Period. But I wondered if that was true. So, I asked some questions of our good friend Google, I found out that Starbucks provided coffee and other beverages to first responders at five RNC venues through a partnership with the Milwaukee 2024 Host Committee, They did not provide a cash sponsorship of any kind. The company has a similar partnership planned with the Chicago 2024 Host Committee for the Democratic National Convention coming up next week. Both host committees are nonpartisan, nonprofit entities that serve as liaisons between the Republican or Democratic National Committee, respectively, as

well as each convention's host city and state.² Normalize asking questions and practice not feeling attacked when people ask questions of you.

From a faith perspective, I want to say this. The Church (Church with a big C) has been very invested in the fallacy that there is only one answer to questions of faith. If there is only one answer and the Church has the answer, then the people will stay connected to the Church...aka keep giving money to the Church and keep trying to convince other people that there is only one answer and it is found with the Church and therefore bring in more money. The sale of indulgences within the Catholic Church is one example of this. Churches that tell parishioners that only people at that church or in that denomination are "real Christians" are guilty of the same thing. There are lots of ways of being a Christian, but love has to be at the center.

One of the things I like about the Banned Questions series Christian Piatt wrote is that for every question asked in the book, several scholars weigh in. Piatt honors all the questions by recognizing that each of us comes to our questions from a different place. Spirituality and questions of faith do not come in one size fits all. It's up to us to read, ask questions, and to be part of a community like this that values questions, is willing to wrestle with hard questions together, and embraces not only the process but the truth: that there isn't one answer or way of believing and there are so many things we will never know.

This is the whole premise of our children's Worship and Wonder program. Each week, the storyteller tells the children a story and asks questions like, "I wonder what the crowd was thinking?" "How do you think Jesus felt?" "What do you think that bread tasted like?" We are teaching children from the very beginning that the Bible will stand up to their questions and that these ancient stories can have more than one meaning. Our job is to look for answers with them. And to remind them and show them that all interpretation must be through a lens of love. If we believe in this grace thing we talk about, then it must impact the way we understand these ancient texts.

This series has allowed us to talk a lot about DCC's commitment to welcoming people who believe different things. Just as not asking questions is easier and faster, being in communities where everyone agrees is easier and decision-making is faster, but it is not better. We are better together.

We just need to keep showing up with open hearts and open minds. And showing up knowing wherever we are, grace is already there. Already there is the potential to draw nearer to the Holy and to each other. God is not offended by questions, so we shouldn't be either. There will be no Bibles thrown at any heads. This is a safe place to ask questions...big ones and little ones, like "Rev. Becker, are you almost finished with

² <https://apnews.com/article/fact-check-starbucks-republican-national-convention-sponsor-416611357117>, accessed 8/16/24.

your sermon?" The answer is yes. Let us show up for each other. Let us ask the big questions together and delight in the answers we each receive. Amen.