

# Two Kinds Of People?

Feast of St. Francis of Assisi  
October 6, 2019 (TRANSFERRED)

"There are two kinds of people in this world..."

Have you ever heard someone make a claim that started like that?

It is **surprising** how those words can grab our attention. Maybe it's because **we know** that *human character is a very complex and mysterious thing...* and **we long** to understand it – both in ourselves and in others. So, if someone is clever enough to have figured out that there are really *only "two kinds of people in the world"* -- then **we want to know** what they are! And we **especially** want to know "*which kind am I?*"

Our minds are very curious. Our minds also like to organize things, and also people. And, sometimes, we organize people like we organize things – by putting them into boxes. You know, there are: the purebreds & the mutts; the sheep & the goats; the wicked & the righteous; the winners & the losers; the renters & the buyers; and so on.... It's a common mental habit.

But when we put people into boxes in this way, it gives us no real insight into the mystery of human character which we are trying to understand. On the contrary, it distorts our understanding, both of ourselves and others. It can even encourage violence (of one kind or another) – against those we've put into the “wicked” box, and come to *fear* or *loathe* as intolerably “different” from ourselves.

**So what are we to make of it** when Jesus, in today's gospel text (Matthew 11:25-30), makes certain big distinctions between people? ...when he says: "*I thank you Father...because you have hidden your truths from the clever & learned and have revealed them to infants...*"

*At least on the surface*, it seems like Jesus might be succumbing to that harmful mental habit of "boxing people in" with some **opinion** about who they essentially **are** in their “nature.” At least it sort of **sounds** like “*There are two kinds of people in the world – "the infants" & "the clever ones."*”

But when we look more closely, we find that the distinction Jesus makes is not based on some superficial opinion, but on a crucial insight about the spiritual life.

In this simple little distinction, Jesus reveals to us the mystery of why, for some people, human character develops into a beautiful, spiritual maturity, while, for others, it just... does not. And it is **infants**, of all people, who expand our understanding of this mystery!

*But what is it* about infants that Jesus is pointing to here? How are infants different from "the clever ones"?

Is Jesus just affirming the romantic view that children are “perfect little angels” until society spoils their innocence? I don't think so. It might be tempting to read that modern view into his mind, but I think he's up to something else here when he makes this distinction.

We find a **clue** to what it is about infants that Jesus is pointing to here where he says: "*Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.*"

*WHO IS IT* that **responds** to such a call? It is those who need help – and who do not deny their need for help – that respond. And... infants are probably the best example of the kind of people who need help and who do not deny needing help. Infants do not speak with words as we do. But if they could, I imagine that, as they looked up to the big people in their world, they might say something along these lines:

*“Come to me...*

- you who can take away this weariness from me and give me rest
- you who can fill me with good things and bring my hunger to an end
- you who can gently wash me and gently dry me and put soft clean clothes on me
- you who can just hold me, or just be with me, so I can know that I am not alone and that someone cares for me.”

When the infant's unspoken plea of "Come to me..." is heard, and met, by the Caregiver...

When the Caregiver responds back by offering herself or himself to the infant....

When the Caregiver responds back to the infant with “Come to me... and I will give you rest...”

...something truly miraculous happens.

**Trust** is born. And grounded in that deep, primal trust, a **new horizon** opens up in the infant; a **new identity** begins to form, in which "*I am my Beloved's & my Beloved is mine.*" A **bond** – far deeper than the fickle bonds of romance – begins to form.

Sadly, when the Caregiver's response to the infant's great frailty is not loving **enough** – for whatever reason – the infant then begins to form a very *different kind of identity*, one which must become very **clever**, in order to feel **safe** in the presence of those he or she does not fully **trust**. Then, finding ways to become **distracted** from his or her needs becomes the top priority.

**But fortunately**, the love of most Caregivers seems to be at least enough for their infants to flourish. It doesn't have to be “perfect,” just “good enough.”

I think what Jesus is saying is *so special* about infants is that they are **supremely aware** of their need for the Other – for the Care – that gives Life. And that they are **deeply responsive** to that Care when it's offered. The infant hasn't yet “forgotten” that – as our old prayer book says –

"**my frailty, without Thee, cannot but fall...**" but, within Thy Care, I flourish. This is the "ordinary" perception of an infant.

But, for most of us adults, this is not our "ordinary perception" at all. In fact, when we encounter it in an adult, it's quite "extraordinary." It shocks us. ***Because adults are supposed to play the "invulnerability" game, aren't they?***

Of course, it's true that in many ways we adults are far less vulnerable than infants. But Jesus seems to be saying that, ***in more important ways***, we are not. This is why he says we need to be "born again" – a spiritual teaching that has been terribly trivialized and turned into a commodity by fundamentalism in our day.

In his contrast between the **infant** and the **clever ones**, Jesus is not putting people into boxes. He is conveying to us what his own continuum of spiritual growth and development looks like. And perhaps to our surprise... it is not the infants... but the clever ones whom Jesus places on the "immature" end of his continuum. It is actually the overly autonomous, "clever ones" who need to "grow up" and become-like-the-infant – *not the other way around*.

Jesus is taking the *ordinary* perception of the infant – and using it as an *analogy*. It is an analogy of that *very different* perception of God, ourselves, and others that (in the church) we call "baptismal identity" – ***that deeper self-awareness which is born when our absolute need is met by God's absolute love...***

It's a mysterious, and highly uncommon, ***kind of self-awareness*** which includes *not only the self* – but God – **and** Others – **and** All of Creation – ***within itself***. It is the kind of self-awareness that we encounter in St. Francis. And cultivating it – within ourselves and our world – is the true purpose of the Church.

Maybe our animal friends are "a bit" like infants, in the way that Jesus is describing. Maybe they also can help us to grow up spiritually, as we respect their dignity, care for them, and earn their trust.

Thanks be to God.

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