

Wondering with Children & Youth

Jeremy Myers | Augsburg College

Associate Professor of Religion – Youth and Family Ministry | myers@augsburg.edu

Learning Outcomes

1. Understand what it means to think theologically
2. Value the theological process as proclamation of good news into peoples' bad news
3. Be able to initiate experiences that help children, youth and families think theologically

What Does It Mean To Think Theologically?

1. **Theology is reflection on God's action in the world.** - In his book, *Christopraxis*, Andy Root makes the point that all theology is reflection on Christ's action in the world. It is not an explanation of or justification for what we do. Rather, theology happens when anyone begins to make claims about what they believe Jesus is doing in the world. This means theology does not require advanced degrees. Children, youth and adults do it. Theology is our reflection on God's action in the world.
2. **Theology helps us proclaim Good News into peoples' lives that actually displaces their Bad News.** - The theologian Douglas John Hall defines theology as the process a congregation engages when it seeks to discern what the Good News is that will displace someone's Bad News. Theology requires us to first listen well enough to really hear what the bad news is. Then we can begin to understand what the Good News of Jesus Christ might actually need to look or sound like.
3. **Theology requires us to weave together God's story (the Christian faith) and our stories (our lived experience).** – Theology is the weaving together of God's story and our story. It is learning to see life in light of the promises God makes. It is learning to pray and hear scripture in light of our life experiences. Theology is not abstract ideas. It is the fabric we make when we weave the stories we hear from our neighbors with God's story of redemption and resurrection.
4. **Theology resists domestication into the church and demands engagement with the world.** - Paulo Freire is a Brazilian educational theorist. He says all education results in either domestication or praxis. Domestication is the blind acceptance of information that has been passed down to you from some authority. Praxis is the integration of what we know with what we experience. Domestication makes us passive members of an irrelevant institution. Praxis makes us empowered disciples of a world-changing movement. Theology will never result in domestication. If it does, you are doing it wrong. Theology will always lead to praxis and transformational engagement with our world.

Bibliography

1. 1 Samuel 3:1-21
2. *Christopraxis: A Practical Theology of the Cross*. Andrew Root. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014
3. *The Cross in our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World*. Douglas John Hall. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003.
4. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Paulo Freire. New York: Continuum, 1990.
5. *Thinking Theologically: Foundations for Learning*. Eric Barreto. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015.
6. *Finding God in the Graffiti: Empowering Teenagers through Stories*. Frank Rogers. Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2011.

PRAYERFUL WONDERING

The Awareness Examen

In *Thinking the Faith* Douglas John Hall reminds us of the philosopher Heidegger's critique of optimism and pessimism as "childish categories" and, instead, urges us to use the biblical categories of sin and hope when reflecting on life. When we ask kids to share their highs and lows we are limiting them to the childish categories of optimism and pessimism. We miss the chance to help them develop the skill of reflecting theologically upon their days. The *Awareness Examen* offers us a theological alternative to highs and lows.

The *Awareness Examen* is an old way of reflecting prayerfully over one's day. It was developed in the 1500's by Ignatius of Loyola as a form of prayer to be practiced twice daily by his order of Jesuits. It is now a form of prayer that is used broadly across most Christianity.

The *Awareness Examen* accomplishes three things.

1. It helps us develop eyes to see and ears to hear God at work in our world.
2. It helps us hear and see God at work in our world in both sin and hope.
3. Overtime it changes our very being, converting us into people who expect to see God working in our world in strange and mysterious ways.

When practicing the *Awareness Examen* . . .

1. Sit comfortably but upright with your spine straight, your feet flat on the floor and your hands in your lap.
2. Sit quietly with your eyes closed for a minute, allowing your muscles to relax, taking long deep breaths.
3. Prayerfully look back over a specific period of time (a day, a few days, or a week). Ask God to help you see the moments where you encountered sin, or brokenness in your life.
4. When you identify this moment, spend time pondering what was going on and how God was at work in that situation.
5. Again, prayerfully look back over the same period of time, asking God to help you see a moment when you encountered hope or healing in your life.
6. When you identify this moment, spend time pondering what was going on and how God was at work in that situation.
7. Give thanks to God for this time.
8. When practicing with a group it is good to give group members the chance to share their moments with one another if they wish. You can do this in many ways including allowing them to draw pictures of the moments that came to mind, or write poems, journal, strike poses, etc. before sharing with the group.

WONDERING ABOUT GOD & LIFE

Everyone holds their own beliefs and theological views about God and life. We miss an opportunity to form community and faith when we falsely assume our young people (or the adults for that matter) all hold the same theological convictions as one another simply because they attend a Lutheran church.

Most theological systems will attempt to explain the Trinity, God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, humankind, Sin, the Church, and life after death just to name a few. However, thinking theologically does not necessarily mean subscribing to a particular theology. It means developing a framework that allows one to view his or her world as if God is present and active within it. We do not need to be a famous theologian to do this. These questions will our young people discover their core theological convictions.

You might want to encourage parents and young people to complete these questions together. You might want to use in a retreat format. Or you might want to simply spend a few minutes on one question each week.

Over time these questions will help young people identify the way they believe God works in the world. Awareness of one's theological framework helps us see, understand and proclaim God's work in the world – work that makes ears tingle.

Encourage your young people to reflect on these questions.

1. How would you describe God to a friend who does not believe in God?
2. How would you describe Jesus to a friend who does not believe in Jesus?
3. How would you describe the Holy Spirit to a friend who does not believe in the Holy Spirit?
4. What do you think God's vision is for humanity's relationship with God? Does reality match God's vision? How? How not? Why? Why not?
5. What do you think God's vision is for humanity's relationship with one another and the rest of creation? Does reality match God's vision? How? How not? Why? Why not?
6. Explain how your Christian faith influences the things you say and do.
7. Who will go to heaven? Who won't? Why?

WONDERING ABOUT GOOD NEWS

BROKENNESS	List ways people in your community experience brokenness and bad news.			
CORE BELIEF	Which of your core beliefs address these experiences of brokenness?			
GOOD NEWS	What would this core belief have to look or sound like in order to be good news for those experiencing brokenness in this way?			

CALL

Given what you have discovered in this exercise, who is God calling your faith community to be?
 What is God calling your faith community to do?