The Left Hand of God

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THE LEFT HAND OF GOD

“Who sits at the left hand of God?” my eleven-year-old, Aidan, asked in church yesterday. It’s a good question, though of course at the time I did what I thought good parents are supposed to do. I shushed him, thus, I realize now, reinforcing that church services are a time to listen, not ask.

Soon catechism will start up again for Aidan. He’s dreading it. Taking an hour out of his week to memorize three lines about the ancient truths of the faith and filling in the blanks about how he should live in relation to these mysteries cramps his style.

I’m okay that his style is cramped; I’m also okay that he complains about it.

Who doesn’t live in tension with creeds and catechisms? The creed—there are several, but let’s choose your favorite version of the Apostles’—is amazing and incantatory, like Shakespeare, a liturgical-laundry-list-shorthand-code of what to believe. It’s the modern founding document of magic realism. It’s beautiful and inscrutable. “Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit.” “The communion of the saints.” “Pontius Pilate.”

There’s probably plenty of room in there for all the loose ends of Scripture, like fish with coins in their mouths to provide tax relief, or all the guardian angels we do not see, both of which I stumbled across in Matthew recently.

Or who sits at God’s left hand.

A catechism, meanwhile, tries to fill in the cracks, to shore up lean-y parts, and flatten down some of the flyaway hairs of perhaps the most wild-haired book in the world. And catechism does shore up teaching, no doubt. A catechism is a historical document that attempts to speak ahistorical truths once and for all, truths untouched by the historical mess of human life. That’s a tall order, so right off the bat I should say, Kudos to the catechizers.

And catechisms, because they aimed high, have done remarkable work, like dispelling superstition and, perhaps most importantly, imparting the blessed assurance we’re all looking for. The answer to “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” in the Heidelberg Catechism is surely a touchstone to be kept in your pocket, to feel its texture and weight in the chaos of the everyday.

But catechisms also seem to want to control the questions like “Who sits at the left hand of God?” “How many fish are swimming around with coins in their mouths and how come I’ve never caught one?” “How can I feel the presence of someone dead if their soul is immediately whisked away to God?”

We think of almost nothing else in the world like we think of the catechisms. (“The catechisms” is awkward, I know, but there are several and this emphasizes their particularities.) That is, we don’t think of them as historical, even political documents, and we don’t tell apocryphal stories about the authors and their feet of clay. Sure, we shouldn’t necessarily mess with creeds for fashion’s sake.

And yes, there have been slight adjustments in both creeds and catechisms throughout the years, but we most often don’t talk about these changes because we seem to want catechisms to be static and not living.

Why don’t we think of creeds and catechisms more like art? For example, take sculpture—take Michelangelo’s David, since it hangs it all out there, and since they recently discovered he’s got bad ankles. First, we don’t think all sculpture is done just because David is such a fine specimen. Instead, we use it to talk about the human form and how Michelangelo viewed it—and how we view
it (apparently Russians have mixed views on his junk too). We talk about the conditions under which it was produced. Artists produce sculpture in relation to or conversation with it. The statue itself needs care and protection, to be displayed, to be seen in context. Sculpture is interesting primarily as it comes alive.

So with catechisms.

I have to be careful. Aidan would never forgive me if he were made to learn both the answers and the historical context of the creeds. That’s not exactly what I’m suggesting.

But we’ve got to find a way to emphasize the beauty of the catechisms that spurs questions and even creativity. Catechisms should be the scales that are the first steps toward improvisation; they should create space for us to find our place in them, but so often they seem to do the opposite.

In our church bulletin not long ago came a request to contact our government officials to make good on President Obama’s promise to bring Syrian refugees to the United States. Closer to home, one of our deacons has looked into the possibility of sponsoring refugee families. My wife is a refugee, and sitting on the bench with her brings the issue incredibly close. However, I wonder how many people in our congregation are actually on board with supporting refugees. Is this the catechism’s fault? Not exactly. Or not any more than the fact that I fail to love my next door neighbor as myself.

But this is where Aidan’s catechism lessons may be better than the Heidelberg Catechism itself. I’m all for catechisms with fill-in-the-blanks. To invite me into the living story of belief. To include in the living doctrine of the church how I might love my neighbor whose kids tromp through my garden. How I might welcome refugees.

Thus, Aidan, here’s my answer to your question:

Lord’s Day 53: Q: Who sits at the left hand of God?

A: ____________.