

Luke 2:41-52 Pastor Bill Uetricht 1 Christmas 12/30/18

It's too bad that the weekend after Christmas isn't as popular as Christmas Eve. Frankly, it's generally a weekend when people have had enough. They are tired, and they just want to sleep in or have traveled to be with family someplace else. I wish it could be different. But I understand that after all the magic of Christmas—little children, gifts, angels, shepherds, and mostly, a little baby—who is really ready to deal with the aftermath, or even the let-down? It's too bad, though. This is a weekend replete with so much that is worthy of reflection. I have a sense that I have word to say today than I did on Christmas Eve.

I get it, though. Who doesn't like a baby? Who doesn't ooh and ahh over a new-born infant? Who doesn't enjoy holding one? Whose heart isn't softened by being in the presence of something so vulnerable, fragile, and yet so beautiful? Who doesn't rejoice that life has this ability just to go on? Christmas Eve is understandably popular. Its magic, its ability to tap into our deepest desires, its connection to sentimentality and tradition just make it a real seller.

But there is not as much magic in dealing with the teenage years. And that's where we are on this weekend after Christmas. It's been five days, but wow, he's now twelve years old. My, how time flies!

And yes, it does! Time flies. Country singer Kenny Chesney warns us: "Don't blink. Just like that you're six years old and you take a nap and you wake up and you're twenty-five and your high school sweetheart becomes your wife. Don't blink!"

Now I know this is well-worn advice, cliché-ish, if you will. But it's true. My baby is now 29. My older one is 31. What the heck? My grandson is six. And truthfully, while life with them still has a degree of magic, especially with that six-year old, it's not quite the same as it was when we held them in our arms. It's much more complicated, more nuanced, sometimes much more painful. The quick passage of time is reality, as is the movement from oohing and ahhing to oo-ing and ahh-ing. All of a sudden, Jesus is grown up. He is a teenager. And those teenage years aren't without challenge.

Luke portrays Jesus' parents as very devout Jews. They are a part of a tradition, and they practice it. According to our text for today, "every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover." Every year! Later in Luke we are going to find out that attendance at weekly gatherings at the synagogue was Jesus' custom. He showed up at church week after week. His parents showed up for the high holy days regularly.

Now I know that it is not overly popular these days, but there is something really good about showing up, about submitting yourselves to a discipline that is regular, dependable, that makes sense out of the passage of time, that makes it clear that life is not just one more day of the same old thing, one more day for working, for making money, for taking care of homes. That regular gathering with the people of God, that participating in the traditions and rituals of a community bigger than yourself reminds us that life is penetrated by a bigger truth, by a specialness that cannot be contained by the same old same old. Life is so much more meaningful when we note it, when we take time to celebrate it, when we breathe in, when we share in the hopes and dreams not just of ourselves, but a whole community, and can I say, by the whole human race. Jesus' parents were not generic humans; they were Jews whose lives were marked by participation in Jewish rites and holidays. And they dragged Jesus along to them. And guess what? He survived.

Actually, the Bible tells us that he thrived. This deep connectedness to the tradition is part of what enabled him to grow in wisdom. Our kids and our grandkids need roots. They need to be a part of something bigger than themselves. Oh yes, they will say that it is boring, especially these days when much of contemporary culture is designed to free us from boredom. But they will survive; they might even thrive. There's some evidence that boredom might be necessary for human ingenuity and more meaningful relationships. Filling time with constant frenetic activity may only serve to make us more frenetic and more bored. The frenetic activity never satisfies us. It is addictive, serving only to ask us to demand more. It is okay for your kids and grandkids to be bored. Connection to something deeper than the latest consumer or technological gadget will bring them a much more meaningful life, even if now they don't get that.

I don't think it is an accident that Luke focuses on the trip to the Passover festival in Jerusalem during Jesus' *twelfth* year. For ancient people and for many people these days, there is something about the twelfth year that is so significant for human development. Our evangelical friends often baptize people around this time. We confirm young people around that age. It's the time of puberty, the time of the beginning of the movement toward adulthood. It's a rugged time, as parents of teenagers can testify. It's a time of growing independence, which is what is happening with Jesus in Luke. And his parents, frankly, are a little ticked off by it: "Child," his Mom says, "why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety."

Note how personally Mary and Joseph take Jesus' action. His movement toward independence is met by their thinking that his action is a personal affront to them and their parenting. "Why have you treated us like this?" Parents often think that. They *often* read their children's behavior as having to do with them. What else would you expect? Parents have been personally and intimately involved with their children throughout their lives. For a long time, these kids have even depended upon them for just about everything. And then boom! They are acting as if their parents don't really matter that much, that what matters is the newfound independence that they are living into.

It's all very normal. Being a teenager means beginning to break away from the control of the parents. Some kids do that more smoothly than others. Some take that step in a bit of a rugged way. Independence isn't easy. Nobody—parent or child—escapes that transition without some wounds.

Now you may say that Mary and Joseph's problems today are in part their own fault. I mean, after all, it took them three days—that particular passage of time ought to sound quite familiar—before they figured out that Jesus was missing. I mean what kind of parents are they? They pull into the gas station to pick up some snacks and then get back in the car, and don't note their son's absence from them for three days? Are these bad parents, or what?

First of all, you have got to understand that we are dealing with a very different culture than our own. Jesus' culture was much more communal in

nature. People traveled in caravans in those days. Parents assumed that their children were being watched by hosts of people. And let's be honest. The children of those days were probably more grown up. They didn't have helicopter parents. Mary and Joseph weren't helicopter parents.

This is a challenge in our own time: parents who have to manage almost all the details of their children's lives; parents who become pests at their children's schools as they run interference for their kids; parents who through cell phones and internet technology are never detached from their kids' lives and decisions. Helicopter parenting cripples some kids. It hinders their movement toward independence, preventing them from figuring out how to manage getting lost, failing, running out of money, losing a sense of worth and purpose. We do our kids a great disservice by rescuing them from life's challenges. Helicopter parenting, while understandable, isn't necessarily beneficial to all of us.

Jesus' response to his parents, after they chide him for making them anxious, is quite telling. He asks them: "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" Luke tells us that they did not understand what he said to them. Of course, they didn't. It was all about them at this point. When you have defined yourself as a parent for so long and then your identity as parent is threatened, of course you don't grasp what is going on. What do you mean that there is Someone or Something more important than us, your parents? Friends, jobs, God? Absolutely ridiculous! No way! We don't know what you are talking about!

But he *had* to be in his Father's house! I know this is tough to grasp, but this movement toward independence, these teenage years of struggle ultimately are about being in the Father's house. Now, they may not seem to be. And in the very individualistic world that we are in right now, this movement toward independence may involve a rejection of the tradition that you raised your kids in, a rejection of the God you raised your kids to trust and to build their lives around. The rejection is part of the struggle for some of being in the Father's house.

Paul Tillich reminds us that we don't struggle with things we don't ultimately care about. Struggle reveals care. And sometimes in our deep caring we reject what has been given us, or if we don't reject it, we tweak it, we change it. It's all a part of the process. Trust me. Jesus, a twelve-year-

old boy at this point, will eventually radically alter the tradition of which he is a part.

And this altering will occur because he has been in his Father's house. He has struggled with the One whom life is ultimately about. The movement toward independence is in its depths a struggle with what life fundamentally means. It's a struggle to discover what gives you worth, meaning, and purpose. And all of these are God issues. They are a matter of being in the Father's house.

What the Christian faith reports and proclaims is that what we discover, or maybe better put, what we are discovered by, as we struggle in the Father's house is love. The struggle in the Father's house is begun by love and reaches its conclusion in love. Our worth is not something we have to earn; it is something that is given. Our meaning and our purpose are not things we have to prove; they are given. Life fundamentally is about love—given by the One whom life is all about. To mature, to grow in wisdom, to be freed ultimately from your parents, is to grow in love.

I don't know for sure, but I suspect that what amazed the teachers and the learners in the temple about Jesus was how much he understood the Father, how much he grasped the love that grasped him.