

Luke 2:41-52 ⁴¹ Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. ⁴² And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. ⁴³ When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. ⁴⁴ Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵ When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. ⁴⁶ After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷ And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸ When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." ⁴⁹ He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" ⁵⁰ But they did not understand what he said to them. ⁵¹ Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. ⁵² And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in divine and human favor.

Luke 2:41-52

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"And Jesus Grew"

Rev. Amy Terhune

"Some years ago, the Journal of the American Medical Association published an article by Dr. Paul Ruskin on the "Stages of Aging." In the article, Dr. Ruskin described a case study he had presented to his students when teaching a class in medical school. He described the case study patient under his care like this:

"The patient neither speaks nor comprehends the spoken word. Sometimes she babbles incoherently for hours on end. She is disoriented about person, place, and time. She does, however, respond to her name... I have worked with her for the past six months, but she still shows complete disregard for her physical appearance and makes no effort to assist her own care. She must be fed, bathed, and clothed by others.

"Because she has no teeth, her food must be pureed. Her shirt is usually soiled from almost incessant drooling. She does not walk. Her sleep pattern is erratic. Often she wakes in the middle of the night and her screaming awakens others. Most of the time she is friendly and happy, but several times a day she gets quite agitated without apparent cause. Then she wails until someone comes to comfort her."

"After presenting the class with this challenging case, Dr. Ruskin then asked his students if any of them would like to volunteer to take care of this person. No one volunteered. Then Dr. Ruskin said, "I'm surprised that none of you offered to help, because actually she is my favorite patient. I get immense pleasure from taking care of her... and I am learning so much from her. She has taught me a depth of gratitude I never knew before. She has taught me the spirit of unwavering trust. And she has taught me the power of unconditional love." Then Dr. Ruskin said, "Let me show you her picture." He pulled out the picture and passed it around. It was the photo of his six-month-old baby daughter.

"Now, I like that story for several reasons. For one thing, it shows us the importance of perspective. And it shows us how essential it is to have all the facts before we make a decision. It reminds us too, that our children have so much to teach us... if we will tune in and pay attention. But also, it reminds me of this dramatic scene in the Gospel of Luke where Jesus lingers behind as a 12-

year-old boy and gets separated from His family for three days. Eventually they find Him in the Temple discussing theology with the rabbis. [5 ¶s from “When Our Children Teach Us” by James W. Moore, www.Sermons.com.] Which is a great story. We don’t hear it all that often, but it does beg the question: so what? What are you and I to do with this story come Monday morning? How does it inform a new week? A new year? Let me offer a little insight. But let me also add that while this sermon is mine, the three points that organize it, I stole shamelessly from another preacher named J. Howard Olds. I believe in giving credit where credit is due, and he helped me learn.

So first off, this is a story about parents who care. The text says that Mary and Joseph traveled to Jerusalem every year for the festival of the Passover. From Nazareth to Jerusalem is probably about 75 or 80 miles. Now, a single person in good shape with a pack and walking stick could probably make that trip in two or three days, but of course, in those days, Mary and Joseph would have gone with family and friends in a big caravan for safety. The caravan would have included children and older family members, so it’s quite likely that it took them a week or so to make the trip. To walk to Jerusalem is no small feat. If you figure it takes a week or so to get to Jerusalem, eight days for the Passover, and a week or so to get home, and then you build in time to get settled, buy your lamb, and so forth before the festival, they’d have been gone from home for close to a month every year. That’s a month that Joseph’s business is closed and there’s no income. A month of mouths to feed and children and stuff to cart south on foot. But they do it, because they are people of faith. They didn’t want to try and see how little they could get by with doing when it came to serving God. On the road, Jesus undoubtedly learned from his parents the truths that he later shared – truths about how to get along with people, to turn the other cheek, to forgive, to care about the beggars on the side of the road or the lepers in pits at the city gate. Jesus would have learned on the road the story of his faith, of God’s deliverance from Egypt and slavery, of God’s covenant and promises. And he would have learned their importance because his parents gave up everything to observe the holy days of their faith. Mary and Joseph care about teaching their children faith.

As they walked, it was a social event, where women would walk together and talk and men would walk separately and joke around with each other, and children would run along and play until they fell asleep on their father’s back or in a cart as they traveled along. Jesus is twelve years old. These days, a Jewish boy or girl is age 13 before they have their bar-mitzvah or bat-mitzvah, but back then, age 12 was the age of accountability. There was no such thing as adolescence in ancient days. Jesus was a child one day and an adult the next, and he is no doubt, enjoying the new-found liberties of being an adult man. His parents undoubtedly assume that he is walking with other young men his age, and it doesn’t concern them that they don’t see him on the road. That would’ve been customary. It’s not until evening when Jesus doesn’t come looking for dinner and his bedroll that his parents worry, and pack up everything to return immediately to Jerusalem.

It is clear as the story unfolds that this is also a record about a faith community that listened. As I noted, Jesus is now an adult in the faith, which means that for the first time, he could join the men in the temple square and listen to them argue, debate, dialogue and learn from one another. He’s mesmerized by what he is experiencing. The bible tells us that his parents find him sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. Nobody told him “hey kid, the Passover is over – go home.” They included him, took his questions, heard his answers, embraced his hunger to learn.

I remember the first time I went to Annual Conference. I too was mesmerized by what I was experiencing. The quality of the preaching and the study, the arduous and contentious debates on the conference floor about resolutions and how we live our faith in the day-to-day. Roberts’ Rules of Order. I loved it all. Older clergy used to chuckle at me and tell me I wouldn’t always like it, especially

if the calling I had sensed on my life to ordained ministry proved lasting, which it has. And I get it now. There are times when I want to bang my head against the wall at conference – times when it’s so unbelievably irritating and exhausting. And yet, I’ve never forgotten how I felt that first time – how my voice was valued and counted, even though I was just a freshman in high school. And I’ve never forgotten the joy of connectedness that binds us together. Even today, some of those teenagers I hung out with are still around as colleagues and friends. We’re all older, but the relationships run deep.

As a church, we can and must be that environment where our young people know they are valued. We should want to hear their voices, but we should also have people who want to give their time and energy to nurturing the faith of our children and teenagers as they grow.

To be sure, it can be frustrating. “I’m reminded of a kindergarten teacher was helping one of her students put his boots on. He asked for help and she could see why. With her pulling and him pushing, the boots still didn't want to go on. By the time the second boot was on, she had worked up a sweat. She almost whimpered when the little boy said, "Teacher, they're on the wrong feet." She looked and, sure enough, they were. It wasn't any easier pulling the boots off than it was putting them on, but she managed to keep her cool as together they worked to get the boots back on, this time on the right feet. He then announced, "You know, these aren't my boots." She bit her tongue rather than get right in his face and scream, "Why didn't you say so?" like she wanted to. Once again she struggled to help him pull the ill-fitting boots off. He then said, "They're my brother's boots. My Mom made me wear them." She didn't know if she should laugh or cry. She mustered up the grace to wrestle the boots on his feet again. She said, "Now, where are your mittens?" To which he responded, "I stuffed them in my boots...." [from Byrl Shaver, as used in “An Unforgettable Day” by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

They say kids are cute so you don’t kill them. And they say that teenagers push our buttons in order to find the boundaries and figure out who they are. The hardest thing I do is try to find someone to work with teenagers. But today more than ever, our young people must be nurture in faith in order to cope, in order to understand, and in order to proactively work on behalf of our world, and they’ll only learn it from those who’ve gone before.

To be sure, this is the story about a boy who grew in his faith. His parents, after searching in panic, worry, and maybe a little anger or guilt for the better part of three days, finally find Jesus with the elders. Didn’t you know I must be in my Father’s House? He’s not being snotty. He’s returning what they’ve taught him all along. That it is important to be there, to worship, to learn, to grow. J. Howard Olds writes, “The Father's business is to seek and save the lost. Could it be that his parents' concern for their lost son was a spark that caused Jesus' deep interest in lost and found? In Luke's gospel Jesus tells stories about lostness:

“1. God is like a good shepherd who goes in search of the one lost sheep. For there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who do not need to repent.

“2. God is like a woman who having lost a precious coin calls in her neighbors on a search-and-find mission, sweeps the house until that which is lost is found and then throws a great party.

“3. God is like a prodigal father, who waits for his wandering child to come home. When he returns he kills the fatted calf and calls for a celebration, for this son of mine was lost and is found.

“4. The lost matter to God and they need to matter to us. [5 ¶]s from “About Whose Business Was He?” by J. Howard Olds, www.Sermons.com.]

Whenever I read this text about the boy Jesus in the temple, I always remember back to my days as a camper at a YMCA camp in Northern Wisconsin called Manito-Wish. My parents sent me there for three weeks every summer for many years, and I loved it. The reason I always think of this

text is because they always ended camp with a Vespers service. Now the camp itself was never particularly religious, but they would do this service, and every year, they read Luke 2:52: And Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and humankind, and they would talk to us about what it meant to grow in these various ways. Wisdom was relatively obvious. Learn all you can. Stature, too, was somewhat obvious, and they'd remind us about the muscles and the confidence that came from portaging a canoe on our back or carrying all our food through the wilderness on the trail for days and days. Growing in favor with humankind was also pretty obvious. They'd talk about the importance of getting along, and of respecting our diversity, and so forth. But I always felt a little sorry for the person who had to speak about growing in favor with God. They'd pick a counselor with an iota of faith to give that talk, and they'd usually refer to nature, and knowing God in the trees and the water, and the silence. It was always short, and never memorable, which is too bad, now that I think back on it. Because it is the relationship we share with God that sustains us in the most difficult times. It is the relationship we share with God that informs our deepest convictions and empowers our work in the world. And it is the relationship we share with God by grace that enables us to pick up and go on when we've failed.

I want to close this morning with words penned by my husband many years ago. This is what he wrote: "I went to seminary in Boston, and I was privileged to have as my advisor The Rev. Dr. Horace T Allen Junior, a distinguished scholar of worship and liturgy, and a member of the Consultation on Common Texts which devised The Revised Common Lectionary. He's gone on to glory now, but in a communion prayer which Dr. Allen wrote, he spoke of Jesus and "his intimacy with our frailty." The line was quite striking even back then, and now it seems more important than ever, because our connection with Jesus is largely drawn out of the joys and sorrows, the perils and potential of human life. The beautiful truth is that Jesus really *does* understand us. His intimacy with our frailty means that Jesus not only understands the hopes and fears of all the years, but our hopes and fears. His intimacy with our frailty means that Jesus understands our real concern over matters of health, finances, and relationships. His intimacy with our frailty means that he was a toddler, a 12-year-old, and a man in his 20s. His intimacy with our frailty means that Jesus understands just how hard it is to live a life of faith in this world, and just how glorious it is when someone does. [from "His Intimacy With Our Frailty" by T. Bradley Terhune, Siloa Lutheran Church, Ontonogon, Michigan, 12/30/2012.]

Jesus, being fully human, had to grow. He grew from infant promise to adult savior. Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in divine and human favor. Go and do likewise. Amen.