

December 27, 2009:

FAMILY PLANNING SUCCESS AND FAILURE

1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Luke 2:41-52; Psalm 148

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After weeks of build-up toward Christmas awash in the cultural orientation to “the magic of childhood,” it’s tempting to tell today’s gospel lesson as, “What children teach us.” But Jesus isn’t playing “Bible Jeopardy.” Despite several hundred years of artistic renditions, Jesus is not teaching the elders in the Sanhedrin. At the age of twelve, Jesus is on the cusp of adulthood, no longer a child, not officially initiated as an adult Jewish male. He is doing what students do: he’s in conversation, asking questions and listening for answers. That he understands what he hears is what amazes folks.

You might experience the same astonishment as that of the Sanhedrin toward the boy Jesus if you eavesdropped on our confirmation class. You’d be astonished at the depth of understanding these kids have for their faith. You’d be amazed by the probing questions and insightful conclusions of all our kids in Sunday School. Parents often bring their children to me with faith questions that knock my socks off—questions that show that God is real for them and that reality has implications for how they live their daily lives. I’m not denying that children teach us. In these and many other ways, they do indeed teach us. You may have benefited from the expertise of a child showing you around a place where she feels at home, while you feel lost and ill at ease. Grandparents tell me that relationships with their own children have been resolved because of the birth of a grandchild, and the questions and interpretations of children have been known to clarify misconceptions in family disputes. Within our congregation, when we have witnessed the believer baptisms of children, the event has changed *us* as well as them. The premise for amazement at the boy Jesus in the Temple is not that unusual.

The gospel writer Luke uses a classic literary structure—problem, solution, resolution. Someone is lost (problem), the family finds him (solution), let’s go home (resolution). The wrinkle comes in the conversation between the mother and son, where we are offered a new problem, solution, resolution. Mary’s question (the problem) is quite reasonable, given the circumstances. “Why have you done this to us?” In the classic format, Jesus’ answer is supposed to be the solution. But this is the gospel. His seemingly pious answer is the Biblical equivalent of “Well, duh” as he answers, “Didn’t you know I would be in my Father’s house?” Since Mary has just said, “Your *father* and I have been looking for you,” this is no resolution to Mary’s “Why?” Twelve years have elapsed since the visit of the angel Gabriel, Mary’s cousin’s ecstatic greeting to her, the shepherds showing up the night of the birth, plenty of time for pondering Simeon and Anna’s prophetic interpretations at his Temple dedication. But Mary still doesn’t understand her boy.

That’s kind of the way with faith. Just because we know something doesn’t necessarily mean we understand and can stake our lives on that information. We can know that God provides for us, but there is still the matter of paying the bills. We can know that God loves our children more than we do, but someone’s got to make sure they zip up their jackets and do their homework and hang out with good responsible kids. We can know God has a purpose for our lives, but when the generation ahead of us is passing away leaving us in charge and meanwhile our old friends are shunning us because they don’t approve of the direction our life is taking and what we thought we could count on has changed—it’s easy to question whether even God remembers that purpose. We can know God intends wholeness, but when we’re waiting on test results and for the treatments to take effect, it feels more like broken than whole.

There are times when the “reasoned” response to life is more like Mary’s question than the boy Jesus’ theological pursuits. “Why have you treated us like this? We’ve been looking everywhere for you.” We’ve got good people in power, the best constitution in the history of the world, why can’t we feed hungry people and keep them off the street? We give our kids a good education, why do they think they need to leave home and church and state? I never missed work, didn’t take anything that didn’t belong to me, always did the tough assignments; why am I laid off? Wouldn’t you like to

believe the answer to those questions is, “God has something better in mind”? The gospel breaks in and surprises us, but it *does not provide clarity*.¹

What we are to make of this story depends on where we locate ourselves in the text. From listening to Godly Play stories, our children learn to wonder about where they are in the story—what motivates the characters in the story, how they feel and respond, and how *they* themselves are like or not like those characters. Mary (and presumably Joseph), did not understand Jesus’ answer. The text doesn’t say that Jesus understood his own answer. It only says that he goes home and is obedient. He continues doing what immediately precedes this story, namely that he “grew and became strong, filled with wisdom.” The boy went back to life-as-it-should-be and his mother thought about what he’d said. From her point of view, it’s a story of ambiguity, incomprehension, confusion. Sometimes our best management and problem-solving doesn’t work. Sometimes all we can do is what Mary did: ponder and treasure, work things out in our mind and heart. We call that “discipleship.” And so we wonder.

Jesus went home, obeyed his parents, did everything a person was supposed to do in that time and place. He established ties in the human community and nurtured his relationship with God. Jesus’ faith wasn’t dropped on him out of nowhere, fully developed. Like every other child ever born, he needed to mature in his faith. For him as for us, it was a life-long task of question and answer, of interaction in the community of faith. We grow up *from* our roots, not *in spite* of them.² Jesus was blessed with parents who nurtured his faith by living out their own. They observed the daily, weekly, annual faith rituals. They had been entrusted with “destiny’s child,” and they are rewarded for their faithful parenting by a kid who has the nerve to grow up and want to test his wings.

Sometimes growing in one’s faith means leaving the comfort and security of home. I hate this part of the story. If you think I can sometimes be a “helicopter pastor,” you ought to see me as a mother. Had I been the mother of Jesus, I would not have gently asked as did Mary, “Child, why have you treated us like this?” Sanhedrin’s presence be hanged, my question would more likely have been along the lines of, “What were you thinking?” Sometimes family is too safe for fully maturing. Sometimes we’ve gotta risk faith on our own. Jesus, for instance, didn’t think he was lost. Maybe he was relishing the peace and quiet of the Temple after the hubbub of the Passover celebration, steeping himself in learning with folks whose faith was year-round, not just the high holy days. But he was certainly taking responsibility for growing his faith, and that is our invitation today as well. Grow up.

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¹ www.Workingpreacher.org, First Sunday of Christmas, Ginger Barfield.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word*, quoted by Kate Huey, Dec 27, 2009, “Who Is this Child?” <http://www.ucc.org/worship>