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I Thought You Had Him! What We Can Learn from Jesus in the Temple

(Luke 2:40-51 NRSV) [Jesus] grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him. 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.

Not long ago, I was waiting for the train in Concourse B at DIA. If you've flown out of DIA, you know that at certain times of day, the waiting area for the train between concourses can be packed with people. After the train emptied, the crowd started pushing forward to board. Then the doors closed. Left behind was one little boy, about five years old. His family had made it onto the train but somehow he'd gotten separated. There was a look of panic on his face as the train sped away, his mother's frantic face glued to the train car's window. Another man and I were in the back of the crowd and saw what had happened. We both stood with the little boy, who was trying very hard to be brave, lips quivering and eyes tear-filled. We assured him that in about five minutes his family would be back. And they were – in a few minutes, the outbound train arrived and you could pick out the boys' parents by the look on their faces as they were glued to the window. And both father and mother came storming out and each was screaming at the other "I thought YOU had him!!!"

Every parent has had that nightmare experience. And these days, our fears are understandably exacerbated by seeing Amber Alerts and Facebook postings of lost children. But the experience is not a new one. Even Mary and Joseph, far removed from the electronic age, experienced it; our scripture describes it in terms that I have to imagine are a bit sanitized: *"When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him "...Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety."* I suspect that "great anxiety" doesn't even begin to cover it as they sped back on foot a whole day's journey separating them from their beloved son, imagining the worst and no doubt echoing those DIA parents "I thought YOU had him!!!"

Did you know that there are exactly two stories about Jesus between the time of his birth and the time he begins his ministry at the age of 30. The first is the story of how Mary and Joseph took Jesus to have him circumcised when he was eight days old. The second story – our scripture for the day – isn't until twelve years later when Mary and Joseph going to Jerusalem with the twelve-year-old Jesus to attend the Passover celebrations. Those festivities lasted a week, and during that time the population of Jerusalem swelled by several thousand as extended families came and camped around Jerusalem so they could be a part of the celebrations and the worship services. Part of what happened during that festival was that those boys who had reached the age of twelve began to be instructed in the matters of the laws and the teachings, the traditions of Judaism so dear and so important. And so that is what Jesus was doing too: learning from those rabbis who were the custodians of that tradition. That was where Mary and Joseph found Him after their fear-filled journey, seated with the rabbis and asking questions and learning from them. Here is the question that animates this sermon this morning: Why did the early church, as it was compiling the scripture that became our New Testament, preserve this one particular story – and only this story – about Jesus from his boyhood? Well, I think there are three reasons, and they have to

do with what this story can teach us.

The first thing the story shows us is this: *Mary and Joseph consciously choose to ground and root Jesus in a tradition. And that is also the first lesson that this story has for us: grounding ourselves and our children in an authentic, worthy, good spiritual tradition is essential to living a good and purposive life.* When Barbara's and my four children were small, every Christmas I was struck by just how important tradition indeed is to children, and what a disservice we do them if we do not choose to root them in a tradition that can give them strength. Such traditions serve to bind a family together, reaching back to what has been and anticipating what will yet be. And one of the things that I discovered is that children, for all their sometimes pose of being jaded at times, are the most tradition-bound creatures on earth when it comes to Christmas traditions. Have you noticed that? *"Let's put something different on top of the tree this year,"* you say, and the resounding chorus of your suddenly curmudgeonly conservative children is *"No, we always put that ratty, falling-apart, decrepit angel on top of the tree – it wouldn't be Christmas without it!"* Our children indeed instinctively know the importance of tradition, don't they?

In fact, one writer says this: "Do we realize that this is one of our greatest gifts to our children as well? ... Faith and traditions are two of the greatest gifts we can choose for our children and grandchildren."¹ Now, there is another point of view that you will sometimes hear, the view that says that it is somehow "unfair" to "make" children be a part of any tradition, but rather that they should be exposed to all traditions – or none! – so that when they are adults they can "choose for themselves." Now, I think I understand the intention behind this point of view; we want our children to be open and tolerant. Yet choosing not to root them in a tradition won't work to achieve that intention. Why? Well, consider an analogy or two; what if we said: *"I'm not going to*

¹http://onefamilyoutreach.com/bible/Luke/lk_02_41-52.html

*teach my children any particular alphabet, or any particular language, or any particular numbering system so that when they are adults they can choose for themselves whether to use the English or Cyrillic alphabet, what language they wish to choose to speak, and whether to use western numerals or Roman numerals.” Just as you can’t learn a second or third language until you have begun to learn a first one, in the same way you have to initially learn your spirituality in some particular system of tradition in order to be able later to choose **any** system.*

You see, nature, as it is said, abhors a vacuum and an un-traditioned child – or an adult, for that matter – will not grow up without a tradition, but will instead grow up having their traditions determined by an increasingly secular culture that too often values things that our faith finds troubling. If you raise a child without a tradition, you increase the odds that he or she will turn to something hurtful to fill a void they don’t know how to name. A child who grows into an adult without a worthy spiritual tradition will be prone to fall for the world’s understanding of what makes a happy and “good” life – the acquisition of more and more stuff, the attitude of get the other guy before he gets you, the expectation that people only do things for selfish motives, the division of the world into winners and losers. So that’s the first lesson of this story, it shows just how crucial the role of a worthy spiritual tradition is for forming lives, young and old.

Lesson number two from this story is this: Did you notice that Joseph, and Mary, and Jesus did not travel alone to Jerusalem but with a “group of travelers”? That little phrase tells us a lot. It tells us that they knew that in life’s journey they would have a better experience if they traveled together, they knew that there were dangers on the road and that the best way to stay safe was to stick together. In my suburban Ft. Worth, Texas, childhood, on the edge of the prairie, we felt free to wander the neighborhood, exploring the creeks, seeing what new treasures were to be had on the trash piles of the houses being constructed in our suburb. We felt both free and yet

safe and our parents felt comfortable enough to let us roam because virtually every parent on those blocks knew every kid. You knew that if something went wrong you could go into any number of houses where you would be taken in and helped. And even if none of those parents could have named it in this way, what they did was to live out the realization that every child is first of all God's child, and that therefore every adult bears a responsibility to those children who cross his or her path. We travel best when we travel together.

Mary and Joseph knew that, and you and I know that. Yet, just as with that troubling notion that children should be raised with no tradition in order to be able to "choose" when they're grown, there is another increasingly pernicious idea all around us – that you can indeed go it alone, invent your own faith, be a good Christian or Jew or whatever all by yourself. You can't. At least you can't do it nearly as well as when you travel with a company of other folks to help teach you and hold you accountable and guide you and love you. To say otherwise is as strange as saying that you are a pitcher but when asked what team you pitch for, you say "I don't pitch for any team, I just pitch." Or that you're an umpire, but you don't umpire any games between any teams; you just umpire by yourself.² Yes, one's faith and religion is deeply personal and one needs to claim and "own," as it were, what you believe. But you just can't get there by yourself. You need a team; you need that whole village, in the same way that Mary and Joseph – and Jesus – needed that village to help when the way is dim, or the path rocky, or the journey perilous and unsafe and scary. **So the second lesson from the story is this: If our faith-journey is to be as rich, as blessed, as purpose-filled as it can be, we need to do it with other people.**

And there's a third and final lesson, and it's a simple one: God values, respects, and wants your honest questions. Did you notice in the story what Jesus

²These examples are adapted from Professor Tex Sample

was doing when his worried parents finally found them? "...they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions." ***Listening to them and asking questions.*** That phrase says so very much, and it suggests to us that we should model our lives after Jesus in this respect too. You know the phrase that had a lot of popularity a few years ago, "What Would Jesus Do?" Well, this story's answer is: *Jesus would ask questions.* And my friends, so should we. There are those who would tell you that if you have a strong faith that means you never complain, you never ask questions. But that is not the way Jesus sees it. It's certainly not the way that those rabbis in conversation with the boy Jesus saw it. The best of the Jewish and Christian traditions have always seen questions as a sign not of faithlessness, but of faithful respect. Your questions mean you take God seriously. Your questions mean that you know that you are human and that God can be trusted to receive your worries and your wonderings, your fears and your doubts, your questions and your conundrums, your honest doubts, even your honest anger. Don't ever let anyone tell you otherwise, because the only way your faith grows is to ask questions honestly. It is after all, what Jesus did! In fact, a pastor by the name of Francis Wade makes the point this way; listen to his wise words: "People are better prepared for life with good questions than with good answers.... **God is better able to work with and through people who are kept open by questions than with those who are closed off by answers.**³ And our traditions are always made better when we know them, practice them together and are open to each others' good questions about those traditions. For, to paraphrase Jesus, traditions were made for humankind, not humankind for traditions.⁴

Last week our Student Associate Pastor, Darryl Searuggs, preached a powerful

³http://day1.org/842-whose_life_is_it Emphasizes mine.

⁴I'm grateful to the Rev. Barbara Blaisdell for these two sentences.

sermon about the changes we need to consider for our lives if we are truly to be God's transformed people – changes in our language, our attitudes, our expectations, our biases, our prejudices. One of the ways to think about that opportunity in the dawn of an anxious new year is to ask “where is Jesus now?” And the answer I come to is that he is now sitting here with each one of us, as he did with those rabbis so long ago – and, as he did with them, he’s now asking **US** questions: questions like does our wallet or checkbook or ApplePay ledger truly reflect our commitment to Him? Questions like: Are we willing to examine the ways that our race or orientation or gender has privileged us in ways that unintentionally but oh-so-clearly hinder Jesus’ dream of a beloved community where there is equity and justice for all? Questions like: Do we truly care about those outside our doors who think that God is a judgmental bully and that Christians are mean-spirited and do we pray for such folks regularly that they might know the God of unconditional love that we know?

There was a bad December storm about to bear down on the mythical town of Springfield, where Homer and Marge Simpson and their next-door-neighbor Ned Flanders live. And as the winds got stronger, Ned turned to Homer and said: “Oooh, *I better go take down the Manger scene. If baby Jesus gets loose upon the world, [He] could do some real damage!*”⁵ The rabbis of long ago were amazed at Jesus’ questions; now it’s our turn. My prayer for you and me in this new year is that we too will not only be amazed by the sometimes hard questions Jesus asks us, but will be spurred to new depths of love, service, joy, and hope as Jesus is truly let loose in us, not to do damage, but to open us up to questioning in the service of God. May it be so!

⁵<http://m.imdb.com/title/tt0701131/quotes> I have taken some slight liberty with the quote for homiletical emphasis. See also http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane_Neddy