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Jesus in the Temple: Three Lessons for Us

(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.

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 isn't until twelve years later, and it is our scripture for today. Other than these two stories, that's it! Now, I have often wondered why there is such a dearth of stories about the boy Jesus in the four gospels that the Church, early in its life, decided were going to be gospels included in what we now call the New Testament. Because – did you know this? – there were actually a number of “gospels” that were written in the first two centuries after Jesus' life and several of them purport to tell stories of his childhood. But the Church wisely rejected these because almost all of them portray Jesus as a kind of boy super-hero – helping his father Joseph in the family carpentry shop by magically lengthening boards that Joseph accidentally cuts too short, or playing with friends and killing birds for sport and then resurrecting them. The Church wisely decided that these stories were likely not indeed about the historical

Jesus, but were flights of fancy but which ran the risk of turning Jesus into a not-really-human cartoonish figure whose life therefore has no relationship to our lives.

Now, as I say, today's scripture is the only other story we have about Jesus as a child, and it is the story of Mary and Joseph going to Jerusalem with the twelve-year-old Jesus in tow. Why did they go? Well, there was an annual religious festival that any Jew who could was required to attend. It lasted a week, and during that time the population of Jerusalem swelled by the tens of thousands as extended families and whole villages 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 part of what Jesus was doing there; learning from those rabbis who were the custodians of that tradition. The crisis in the story comes, of course, on the way home – after Mary and Joseph, together with their whole village, have walked a whole day towards home, they discover that Jesus is nowhere to be found. Any parent has had one of those scenes: *"I thought you were going to pick him up from school?!?"* *"No, you were going to pick him up,"* as you race to finally pick up the poor, temporarily abandoned child. Whatever conversation Mary and Joseph may have had like that one goes blessedly unrecorded as they race back to Jerusalem and find Jesus just where they saw him last: seated with the rabbis and asking questions and learning from them.

Now, I want to return to the question: Why did the early church, as it was compiling the scripture that became our New Testament, preserve this particular story about Jesus from his childhood? Well, this morning I want to hazard an answer that question, and in fact, I think there are three things in particular, amidst all the things that

one could say about this story, that I think this story teaches us.

The first thing the story shows us is this: *Mary and Joseph very consciously choose to ground and root Jesus in a tradition.* **And that is also the first lesson that this story has for us: grounding one's children – and oneself, for that matter! – in an authentic, worthy, good spiritual tradition is essential to living a good and purposive life.** Particularly when our four children were small, each Christmas time, I would be struck once again 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. In your household, like ours, I suspect that there are traditions that have developed about how you celebrate Christmas. They may look odd or “different” to outsiders, but they serve to bind your family together, rooting you in a shared story, reaching back to what has been and anticipating what will yet be. And one of the things that I have discovered is that children, for all their sometimes pose of being jaded at times, are the most conservative 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 but that ratty, falling-apart, decrepit angel on top of the tree – it wouldn’t be Christmas without it!”* For you see, whatever they sometimes will say, our children instinctively know the importance of tradition, don’t they?

In fact, one writer says this, commenting about Mary’s and Joseph’s choosing to root Jesus in the traditions of their faith:

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; in fact, you seem to

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

hear it more and more. It is the point of view that says that it would be 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. And the intention is a good one: 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 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.”* The result would be complete illiteracy! No, one must learn one’s spirituality in some particular system of belief in order to be able to choose **any** system of belief.

But there’s a maybe even more important reason that grounding ourselves and our children in a tradition is important, essential: it’s simply that nature 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 society 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. It’s why cults can continue to grow when they offer – awful as many that we could name are – to tradition-less young adults meaning and structure that they never experienced. And even if the results are not that dire, a child who grows into an adult without a worthy spiritual tradition will simply 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. So that’s the first lesson

of this story, one of the reasons I think it was indeed preserved: 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? Luke refers to a “group of travelers.” And 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 – just as there are dangers on your journey and mine – and that the best way to stay safe was to stick together. In suburban Ft. Worth, Texas, 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, deciding to bicycle out in that prairie to hunt for crawdads. We felt both free and yet safe and our parents felt comfortable enough to let us roam because every parent on those blocks knew every kid, and if you were out of line they had no problem letting you know. And on the flip side, if you were in trouble, you knew that you could go into any number of houses where any number of moms or dads, would take you in, feed you milk and cookies, and provide a listening ear to a temporarily troubled kid. 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.

But you can’t do these things alone. 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 ineffective idea that is 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 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 it’s like saying, “I’m an umpire, but I don’t umpire any games between any teams; I just umpire by myself.” It’s like saying “I’m a quarterback, but I don’t have a team to lead; I just quarterback by myself.”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, we need a team!**

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 where Jesus was when his worried parents finally found them? Luke tells us: *“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. It is meant not just to tell us how much the rabbis saw in this young man and how they treated him as an honored student, inviting him to sit with them – although it does tell us these things – but it also tells 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

²These examples are adapted from Professor Tex Sample

means you never complain, you never ask questions. But that is not the way Jesus sees it. It's certainly not the way that the rabbis with whom the boy Jesus saw it. In fact, Judaism, the soil out of which Christianity grew, values a good question even more than a good answer! The rabbis of the Jewish tradition – as well as the wisest folks in the Christian tradition – have always seen questions as a sign not of faithlessness, but of 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.

And when you do so, you are in very good company, you know? Read through the Psalms sometimes, and notice how many of them are complaints or questions that the writer is addressing to God: “How long, O Lord?” “Why is this happening?” “Why have I been abandoned?” God is big enough, loving enough, wise enough to receive our honest questions, our honest doubts, even our 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!

It's been many years now, but you may remember author and minister Robert Fulghum's now-clasic book, All I Really Need to Know, I Learned in Kingergarten. There is a line in there that could well sum up what we learn from this story, sum up this story of a week in the life of the boy Jesus, sum up this story's model of what our faith can and should be. It's this: *“When you go out in the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands and stick together.”*³ My friends, in this new year, in a time of anxiety in our world, anxiety over our wallets and our pensions and our jobs, anxiety perhaps about our families or our friends, a time of change in the world around us and in our church, indeed, let's do what Jesus did: ask questions, hold hands, stick together. And we will thereby glorify God. Amen.

³http://www.kalimunro.com/learned_in_kindergarten.html