

Sermon for February 7, 2021—“Our Father’s Business”

Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B—Text: Luke 2:41-52

Do you remember being twelve years old? Maybe that was a long time ago or maybe just a couple of years. If you can’t remember exactly, ...think about somebody you know who’s twelve: sixth grade or maybe seventh, the end of elementary school in some places, or the beginning of middle school. Twelve’s an in-between time. Not yet fully grown, but no longer a little kid.

In some parts of this country, twelve year olds are working full-time. In some parts of Africa, a girl who’s twelve now heads her household, caring for younger siblings after their parents have died. In far too many countries, a boy who’s twelve is carrying a rifle, as part of a rebel army he probably didn’t choose to join. Do you know somebody who’s twelve?

When Jesus was twelve, he and his parents went to Jerusalem, as they did every year, for the festival of Passover. It occurs to me that twelve is one of those special Bible numbers: Twelve sons of Jacob. Twelve tribes of Israel. Twelve disciples. Twelve baskets of bread and fish left over after feeding the multitude. So, Jesus’ age may be significant, or maybe just a coincidence. Either way, Jesus was twelve, an in-between time.

Luke places the story there, in between the infant Jesus’ dedication in the temple and Jesus’ baptism as an adult in the River Jordan. Luke’s the only one who tells this story. He’s the only gospel writer who says anything about Jesus’ childhood. Don’t you wish we had more stories?

Some movies have speculated about this, as have a few books. They explore what it might have been like, picturing Jesus working in Joseph’s carpenter shop, or sitting on Mary’s lap listening to stories. One particular apocryphal book—that is, a book not considered to be authentic—called the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, tells stories of miraculous events from Jesus’ boyhood. Things like: bringing a dead bird back to life or punishing the neighborhood bully. As it happens, Anne Rice mentions these events in the book she wrote about Jesus’ childhood, *Christ the Lord*.”

Conversely, Luke doesn’t try to overwhelm us with magic or miracles. His story is far more ordinary and he seems to know something about growing up. Like lines on the door frame marking a child’s growth, Luke marks Jesus’ life by scenes in the temple. Earlier in chapter two of Luke, Jesus was dedicated in the temple. It was then that aged Simeon held Jesus in his arms and said, “Lord, now let your servant go in peace for my own eyes have seen your salvation.”

Between that day and age twelve, we know nothing except this: Jesus lived with his parents and their lives were marked by the rhythms and rituals of Jewish life. So it was natural, even ordinary, that the next scene brings us again to the temple.

In the rhythm of Jewish life, age twelve would be about the time of the rite of bar mitzvah—meaning “son of the law” or “son of the covenant”—though the rite itself did not take place in Jesus’ time, but actually closer to the Middle Ages. Either way, it was a time when others would no longer speak for Jesus.

Neither angels, nor Simeon would speak for him—now he would speak for himself. And so he did. There in the temple he listened and he asked questions. He spoke and gave answers that amazed his teachers. So, what we have here then, is a glimpse of Jesus as a youth.

And we have it because of the importance of understanding that Jesus experiences normal human physical, emotional and intellectual growth. But he's also under what one author would call the "special overshadowing grace of God, which fills him with wisdom and strength." That's a nice way to put it, this intermingling in this boy of the beauty of God, the wisdom that would shape his life and his spirit, and the normal growth and experiences of a typical boy growing up.

It's also important to note that pilgrimages to Jerusalem on three great feasts—Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles—were customary for everyone, except for people who lived at great distances. In fact, entire clans and villages would travel together. So, what Jesus is experiencing, in this trip to Jerusalem at Passover isn't really all that extraordinary, and is, in fact, a normal part of a boy's life in first-century Judea.

But, of course, what **is** extraordinary is Jesus himself—as a young boy—already following the spirit and will that the Father is teaching him. Wisdom and its pursuit are already showing in this boy, who's just maturing into adulthood at twelve years old.

His parents cannot find him as they are returning to Nazareth. He's not among their kinfolk, or the others traveling with him. After a day of searching for him among the company, they must return to Jerusalem. And there he is, speaking with the teachers in the temple, astonishing everyone with his wisdom, his "understanding and answers." Plus—we note that he's also asking questions.

And so we can wonder for just a moment, if his questions are those he will use so cleverly during his ministry to also teach and make his points. But the wisdom showing in this boy is, I think, the important thing. Most notably, it makes him independent. He has acted on his own, staying behind in the temple, absorbed in what's there, showing wisdom and spiritual understanding.

But I've also wondered on occasion, whether he also got a glimpse of some of the abuses that took place in the temple as well. Might he have witnessed, for the first time, the money-changers whose tables he would later overturn?

In any case, upon finding Jesus, his mother says to him: "Son, why have you done this to us? Look, your father and I have sought you anxiously." And Jesus' well-known reply is, "Why did you seek me? Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?"

Besides being memorable words, they juxtapose an earthly father, Joseph—to whom Jesus is ordinarily obedient, a man we know to be both a good man and a good earthly father, full of compassion and righteousness—with his Father who is in heaven, to whom he will later teach us to pray. Jesus, on the brink of adulthood, is in his Father's house, about His Father's business.

Quite a shock—I'd imagine—to his parents, who don't seem to understand what he's talking about. But we're told, he returns home with them and is subject to his parents, showing obedience to his mother and father. Again, the emphasis is on a normal boyhood, but one clearly shadowed by wisdom by the Holy Spirit and by the will of the Father.

If we understand wisdom, to be synonymous with the Holy Spirit, then we again can see the foreshadowing of the Trinity here with Jesus, of course, the Son. We see it in the final verse of our reading, which tells us that “Jesus increased in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favor.” It brings into plain view, as one theologian commented, “the wisdom and grace inherent in Him.” What this means is that in his Incarnation, Jesus makes humanity completely his own, including progress in wisdom and grace. He experiences and sanctifies **every** stage of human life.

It's impossible to say exactly how the human and the divine came together in Jesus. Not that theologians haven't tried to explain it over the last 2,000 years. Likewise, it's impossible to say what that felt like for Jesus—what was going through his mind at any given point in his life. Again, there've been many attempts to explain and understand his dual nature, to me most notably in the book (and later the movie), *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

Since he is at once both God **and** human, he increases in a human way in the grace and wisdom which are already fully inherent in his divine nature. The same capacity is inherent in us as well. What am I talking about? Simply this and here, brothers and sisters, is the thing.....

I believe that the capacity for the divine, the potential to be more and more like Christ, is ours as well, as part of what it means to be made in God's image. Indeed, that Jesus' growth prefigures our own growth when we're united with him. I think the last verse in our reading about Jesus “increasing in wisdom and years, and in divine and human favor” makes a very important point.

It's an example for us and lets us know that we're expected to walk hand in hand with wisdom in our own lives—our **entire** lives—through our union with Christ. We're expected to grow, to transform and change, in the light of the Holy Spirit. We must seek out that transfiguring light—through faith and relationship with God, through prayer, worship and study. The expectation being that it will work in us throughout our lives, our faith becoming an integral part of our lives—the divine in each of us, mirroring God, being reflected in all we think, say and do, all throughout our life-long journey of faith.

This what I believe Scripture means when it talks about righteousness. It's about spiritual integrity. It's about—though I don't want to over-simplify this—talking the talk and walking the walk. It's the idea that our faith permeates every aspect of our lives, fully integrated, that who we are and what we believe are inseparable.

This is what Jesus means when he tells us we are to bear good fruit—fruit that will last. **This** is why I talk so much about spiritual maturity! **This** is why it's so important! As a matter of fact, I'd say that this is the whole purpose and point of Christianity. Jesus wants disciples—those seeking to learn from him, those willing to pick up their crosses and follow him. This is “our Father's business.” This is what we're to be about our **entire** lives—not just as children, or as young adults, not only when it suits us or when it's easy.

The picture of the boy Jesus who lives the life of a normal child obedient, dutiful in his parents care, the foreshadowing of his future teaching in the temple is a beautiful one. It juxtaposes the elements of **his** divinity and **his** humanity, in harmony **and** in its growth which, indeed, prefigures our **own** growth in union with **him** as our example and our teacher. That we are—each of us—fearfully and wonderfully made in God’s image is proof of that. We must grow into that grace, allowing it to shape us, transform us, that we would then reflect it outward.

Even at twelve, Jesus knows he has a job to do. So—too—do we.

We must all be about “...our Father’s business.”

Thanks be to God. Amen and Amen.