

January 5, 2019
Sermon Manuscript

Luke 2:41-52

41 Now (Jesus') parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. 42 And when (Jesus) was twelve years old, they went up according to custom. 43 And when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it, 44 but supposing him to be in the group they went a day's journey, but then they began to search for him among their relatives and acquaintances, 45 and when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, searching 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 And when his parents saw him, they were astonished. And his mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress." 49 And he said to them, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" 50 And they did not understand the saying that he spoke to them. 51 And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart.

52 And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.

Biblical Brilliance

So today is the final Sunday of Christmastide. On Christmas Eve and last Sunday we considered the incarnation - Jesus coming to earth as a baby - and then next Sunday the liturgical calendar will spring us forward to the beginning of Jesus' public ministry as an adult with the feast day commemorating his baptism. And so it is appropriate that today's gospel passage is the only episode scripture provides for us from the thirty-odd years between Jesus' infancy and adulthood.

Well, the setting of this passage is that Jesus and his family had made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the annual feast of the Passover. And from their hometown of Nazareth, this would've been a journey of more than 60 miles and a minimum of five days in each direction. And Jesus' family made this pilgrimage every year, saying they "went up according to custom". But what makes this particular Passover memorable when Jesus was 12 - what causes Luke to deem it worthy of recording - is that this is the year that Jesus' parents lost him - they forgot to bring him home - and didn't even realize it for a full day.

Now, before we jump to conclusions and think Mary & Joseph should've had Child Protective Services called on them, we need to be mindful of a few things. First of all, we must be careful not to project 21st Century concerns onto the text. These days, parents' concerns about safety and crime have made it so there is a much greater sense of it being necessary to know where their 12 year old kid is at every moment of every day. And we should also keep in mind that in first century Israel, a 12 year old boy was just a year short of being considered a man. In fact, Mary herself is believed to have been only 14 or 15 years old when she was engaged to Joseph and became pregnant with Jesus by the Holy Spirit, where these days they're saying adolescence lasts until age 26 for females and 29 for males. So needless to say: these were different days.

But we need to also understand that the typical circumstances around these pilgrimages to Jerusalem were that average travelling caravan would number around seventy people; perhaps a dozen households from the same town would travel together. And after the festival was over, when a caravan would leave Jerusalem to head home, it was common for the women and children to depart earlier on that first day than some of the men, because the women & children travelled more slowly and the men could perhaps take care of a little more business in the city and then catch up to them before nightfall. So this explains why Joseph and Mary probably would've travelled separately on that first day, and maybe why each of them could have assumed that Jesus was with the other one.

But an additional factor to consider was that it was customary for the mother to primarily care for the young children, but once particularly a son was close to coming of age, the father would take on an increasingly greater responsibility with them, concerned with educating and preparing them for manhood.

So this sheds some further light on why:

- Joseph might've assumed Jesus was with Mary,

- why Mary might've assumed Jesus was with Joseph,
- but also why three days later, when they end up finding Jesus in the temple, he seems to have thought he was exactly where he should've been the whole time, as he asks in verse 49 "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" #

But having gained some clarity on how Mary & Joseph could've possibly lost the Son of God, I should say that all of this is somewhat beside the point. At least it is beside Luke's main point. You see, what is sure to have been a primary influence for Luke to include this story in his gospel is that, when someone was writing a biography about a great man in the first century, it was a common literary motif to begin by including a story or two from their childhood that demonstrates how there were already signs early on that the child was exceptional *prior* to discussing their achievements as an adult. Therefore, Luke's main reason for including this episode in his gospel can surely be found in verses 46 and 47, where he writes, "After three days they found Jesus in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers." In other words, in this passage Luke intends to begin revealing the nature of Jesus' brilliance. So I want to dig into a little bit today. But in addition, I also want to consider Mary's rollercoaster of responses to what's happened: as she's initially astonished at seeing Jesus there in the temple (v48), but then quickly grows upset with him (v49), then she is confused by his response to them (v50), until finally treasuring up all these things in her heart (v51). I believe what Mary goes through here provides some insight into what the life journey God intends for each one of us can sometimes be like once *we've* entered into relationship with Him through His Son, Jesus. # # #

But I'd like to begin with what this passage reveals to us about Jesus. I know when I preached on this passage about four years ago, I suggested that here Luke is supporting what scholar Dallas Willard would later assert: that Jesus is the smartest person who ever lived. And I still believe this is not only true, but a really important idea for us to ponder; the reason being that...

- most people these days don't think of Jesus in these terms. If I were to ask you the first five adjectives you think of to describe Jesus, I doubt "smart" would make the list. And yet, it's obviously true.
- So being reminded of this can give us a greater appreciation for the privilege we have of being in a spiritual relationship with Jesus, because it means we can literally go to him about anything; there is no problem in our lives or quandary we could run into that could be outside of Jesus' field of expertise.

But as helpful as it may be to assert that Jesus is the *smartest* person who ever lived, I'm also not sure that it says *quite enough*. And this is because what we tend to think of as "smart" these days really *falls far short* of what this passage reveals about Jesus' brilliance. You see, these days when most people think of a "smart" person, we tend to think of someone whose intelligence has allowed them to become extremely knowledgeable or extremely successful in some field or both! If I asked you to think of someone who is smart, you might think of Stephen Hawking or Bill Gates or that Jeopardy contestant whom no one seemed able to defeat a few months back.

But what strikes me about this passage is that what it highlights about Jesus' brilliance is a bit different from the sort of brilliance our culture tends to esteem. First of all, notice that what most amazes the teachers in the temple are the questions he asks and the understanding he demonstrates - and the word Luke will use at the end of this passage to sum this up is wisdom (in verse 52). What it is holding these people spellbound with twelve year old Jesus is not so much his knowledge or recall of scripture - though I'm sure he has it - but rather His wisdom *about* the word and what it reveals about God and His ways.

And of course, these first indications Luke gives of Jesus' wisdom as a youth would only be on even fuller display by the time Jesus is an adult.

- So two chapters later, after Luke has moved on to describe Jesus' adult ministry in chapter 4, he reports that people were "astonished at (Jesus') teaching, for his word possessed authority" (4:32); what Jesus said rung true in a way no one else's teaching ever had.
- And then the most famous example of Jesus' wisdom probably comes in His Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew 5-7, which remains the greatest moral teaching the world has ever seen or ever will see.

But in addition to the remarkable wisdom of twelve year-old Jesus, in our passage he also displays a remarkable level of emotional intelligence in his interaction with his mother.

When we read Mary's words in verse 48, it's hard not to imagine her as pretty frazzled. After spending three days searching high and low for Jesus, Luke writes, "*And when his parents saw (Jesus), they were astonished. And his mother said to him, 'Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress.'*"

Now, as a general rule I try to avoid critiquing other people's parenting. I remember before having kids of my own there were times where I could be sort of judgmental when I was around other people who had kids; I would think silly things like "Gosh, can't they just get their kids under control or to behave or teach them not to talk back." But since I've had kids of my own, I get how ridiculous that was. There is no judgment; the struggle is real!! But having said that, I guess I am gonna violate that rule here and critique what we see of Mary in verse 48 a bit. You see, when Mary scolds Jesus, saying, "*Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress,*" she is being authentic in expressing how she feels. And while this is generally a good thing, perhaps it's not entirely appropriate to do with one's 12 year-old son. Alternatively, perhaps Mary could have chosen instead to be transparent with her husband about her feelings and responded differently to her son by, for example,

- expressing gratitude that she has found him: "thank you God for helping me find the messiah after losing him for a few days!"
- or she could have behaved like an emotional adult here and not held him responsible for how this incident made her feel
- or she might've first taken responsibility for her own part in losing track of him: "sorry Jesus for leaving town without you."

So I'm not saying the way Mary responded was the worst parenting ever - and I'm also not saying I would've done any better in those circumstances - but we can still conclude that this might not have been Mary's finest moment.

And yet, look at how Jesus responds: he lets his mother have her experience and say what she's gonna say without accomodating to what's inappropriate about it. So He doesn't take responsibility for what Mary is trying to throw on him, but rather He expresses his wonder at how she could've forgotten about who his dad is (v49). So in this interaction Jesus *maintains* his own sense of self, and though neither of his parents seem to really *get* what he says in response, he then chooses of his own volition - not from any guilt or shame, but of his own free will - he chooses to return with them to Nazareth and to be submissive for the remaining time that they're in authority over him.

So I'm suggesting that the level of emotional maturity Jesus displays here is exactly what anyone should hope for from a twelve year-old. And then later on, once Jesus is an adult, he continues displaying an emotional acumen that is truly jaw-dropping. And this is probably most clearly highlighted in John's Gospel, where if we were to read through it just paying attention to Jesus' emotional intelligence, some episodes that would stand out include:

- his interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4 and the woman caught in adultery in John 8, where he manages not simultaneously avoid shaming them while also speaking the truth to them in love and inviting them to something more;
- then there is the way he prepares his disciples for his departure in John 13-14, tending to their questions and fears with empathy,
- and how he ministers to his own mother from the cross in chapter 19, ministering to the significance of her (as a widow) losing her oldest son and inviting the beloved disciple to take over his responsibilities.

These are just four examples, but I could go on, because time and again we find Jesus consistently displaying an unmatched capacity to be empathetic, to recognize people's needs, and to meet those needs in healthy, boundaried ways. # #

So the characteristics of Jesus' brilliance this passage highlights are his wisdom and his emotional intelligence. And what I want you to see is that the way the characteristics of Jesus' brilliance *contrast* with the forms of brilliance most often esteemed in today's world is that Jesus' brilliance is inherently relational; Jesus is brilliant in wisdom about the ways of God toward humankind and in compassion toward humankind itself, in ways consistent with the Two Greatest Commandments we recite each Sunday to love God and our neighbor. Where in our 21st Century western society, what we tend to esteem as brilliant - someone being able to use their smarts to become extremely knowledgeable or successful - you'll notice that isn't necessarily relational *at all*. Those our society esteems as the most brilliant - the best of the best - could be at the top of some field or know a lot or have a lot of money, while still being completely ignorant of the ways of God or incapable of the simplest form of compassion. It's a brilliance that is highly individualistic and perhaps not even immune from (in some cases) being narcissistic. # #

But what's significant about all of this for us is not just what it reveals about Jesus' brilliance, but because it also reveals the ways He most wants to grow us. Just think about it: if God's goal for our Christian lives is to transform us become more and more like Christ, then what this points to is that God is most interested in bringing about transformation to us in relational ways: in how we relate to Him and our neighbors.

But given that we live in a society that tends to esteem individualistic brilliance far more than relational brilliance, just take a guess what sort of influence this is likely to have on the spiritual pursuits we choose. It means that as we seek to grow in Christ:

- We may be more prone to pursue that through trying to learn more information His word, as opposed wisdom about what relational truths it reveals about God, which our lives could be misaligned with; we may be more inclined to fill up our heads with knowledge than to ponder truths in our hearts.
- Or, we may be inclined to pursue spiritual experiences or giftings that others may not have, as opposed to doing the harder work of partnering with God to confront what remains broken in our hearts and a hindrance to loving others as Christ does. I still maintain that gifts like speaking in tongues have never assisted anyone in becoming more loving toward their neighbor; and at times it may even be counterproductive and cause people to become less-loving or like a clanging gong.¹

I can remember a season in my life maybe 15 years ago, particularly when I was in college, where I was obsessed with accruing knowledge about the Bible and Christianity. And it was really out of insecurity²; somewhere along the line I had attached my sense of worth to how much knowledge I had; and in doing so I put myself on this hamster wheel of always needing to know more and learn more; and God forbid someone ever ask me a question that I didn't have an answer to or use a word that I didn't know its meaning. So I put all of this energy learning more and

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:1 - "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal."

more and keeping this insecurity at bay - and I was also pretty into pursuing spiritual highs through worship and charismaticism - but amidst all of this, you know what wasn't changing a single bit, was my spiritual or emotional maturity. When I was in college I was probably about a 6 year old emotionally; maybe a little more, not more than ten. And being an emotional child in a college kid's body meant that I would handle life and adversity and cope with powerful emotions in immature ways, similar to a child under 10. So the reason I'm highlighting the link between emotional maturity with spiritual maturity is because I agree with what Peter Scazzero says, that "It is impossible to be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally immature." (Well, I must agree with it; I threw it on the marquee this week.) But you may be thinking: "Wow, Fr John's saying when he was 20 years old he was only emotionally about six years old," and the answer is "oh, yes. But unfortunately that's not that abnormal." All over the place - all throughout the Church - people are walking around in adult bodies but various life circumstances caused their emotional life to get stunted along the way. It is almost becoming the exception to find someone who his emotional age matches the number of years they've been on this earth. And this could be the biggest problem plaguing the Church today: complete inattention to becoming Christlike and maturing in our emotional lives compounded by a hunger for knowledge about Christianity & scripture & theology that is disconnected from wisdom about what difference it makes and how it should shape and change the way we live our lives.

Now, don't get me wrong, it's not that seeking knowledge for knowledge's sake or being blessed with spiritual, mountaintop experiences is inherently bad. No, no: these things are fine and good when kept in perspective, as secondary pursuits. Some of us really enjoy intellectual pursuits, while the Lord has blessed others in some really unique spiritual ways. But we just need to be clear that none of these things are probably gonna move the needle at all on our ability to walk faithfully before God and be Christ to our neighbor. And so we mustn't confuse these secondary pursuits with what should be our highest spiritual goal of allowing God to make us more like Jesus. In other words, the warning here is to keep the main thing the main thing.

But how do we do this? How can we prioritize the Lord increasing in us the sort of brilliance Jesus models instead of just seeking after a spiritualized version of what our world esteems?

Well, I think first of all we need to pray for it: pray for wisdom, pray for God to bring us into greater emotional maturity. So we can ask God to grow us into a wisdom and stature after the model of our Lord Jesus and at the same time we can repent of any ways we've given ourselves to spiritual pursuits aimed more at inflating our ego than at helping us live in God's truth and love our neighbor. But I'll warn you that we mustn't pray these things lightly.

I may have shared here before that I think one of the biggest turning points in my life was when I was probably 24 or so and I began praying for wisdom; and this was brought on because my priest at the time - in Burbank - just displayed and expressed wisdom like I'd never witnessed before and I could see how it serve his flock. So I remember thinking to myself, "That would come in handy. I want some of that." And I began to pray for it. But I wanna tell you that it was a good thing I was naive about what that prayer meant: because, the thing is, unless you're Solomon whom God seems to have just zapped with wisdom, God doesn't just zap people with wisdom. No, I'm convince that wisdom is learned through a series of painful experiences of self-examination and pushing through uncomfortable situations in new ways. I'll tell you: any wisdom I may have - that God has given me - that's the way it's come: is through being willing to not shy away from painful experiences of growth - and get some emotional maturity thrown in. I'm still probably not emotionally a 36 year-old, but I think I'm at least into a double-digit age.

You see, the ironic thing about the brilliance of Jesus - the relational sort of brilliance like wisdom and emotional maturity - is that the context where we develop it is just in ordinary life; through seeking God's help to be present and open and loving to ordinary things of life that come our way. You see, in order for us to grow &

progress more into the wisdom & stature of Jesus, we should begin to view the events of ordinary life as a proving ground, for revealing not only the progress we make, but also where there is still room for growth. You see, I would suggest **that** is what this incident of losing Jesus was for Mary. She wasn't trying to be some negligent parent; *bleep* just happened; life happens, right? A miscommunication with Joseph and they're a days journey away from Jerusalem without knowing where their kid is. And when she finds him, as we said, she doesn't respond horribly, but she could've responded better. But she'd probably been telling herself for three days what a horrible mother she was; and she may have feared how God would react toward her if something serious happened to Jesus. So by the time she found Jesus, she wasn't in any state to engage him positively.

Sometimes what causes us to slip into bad emotionally negative places - such as anxiety or depression or rage - comes from losing sight of reality - I mean, the ultimate reality - from forgetting God's truth about who we are or neglecting to ensure we are being filled up with his love. And this is probably what happened with Mary. This test that her ordinary life had thrown at her perhaps revealed how she had progressed - maybe a few years before she would've handled things much worse (maybe she would've slapped Jesus in the face, I dunno) - but it also shows where she still has plenty of room for growth. ## ##

So how does Mary move forward? How does she get back on track? Well, by tending to her heart. Now, I don't want to overinterpret the text here, but after Mary & Joseph are unable to grasp what Jesus says to them in the moment, verse 51 says "*he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart.*" Somewhere along the line Mary had lost sight of the reality of who God was and the promise he had on her life, and the way she could get back on track was to minister these truths to her heart. ##

So before we close, I want to just invite us to consider how all of this may be relevant to us as we're all coming out of the Christmas holidays; one of the more relationally challenging seasons of the year. So, I wanna invite you to reflect on that for a moment:

- And first I want you to ask yourself, from a relational standpoint, what did you do well this year in comparison to previous years?
 - Maybe you were able to resist a loved one baiting you into that political conversation where you were likely to hurt each other.
 - Maybe you didn't neglect Jesus quite as much as you have in past holiday seasons.
 - Maybe you were able to give yourself more compassion than usual for having a hard time with something
- If anything comes to mind: celebrate it! Thank the Lord for it!
- But second, I want you now to try to think about where you were *least successful* this holiday season in loving God and your neighbor.
 - Where did you maybe sorta step in it or let your emotions get the best of you?
 - Or maybe an old familiar pattern reared its head just like years before
- Well, whatever comes to mind: first, I want you to receive God's grace and forgiveness for it. Perhaps hold try to hold these in your heart when we do confession here in a few minutes, and surrender it to the Lord, and receive his absolution
- But maybe also pick one of those to do some reflection on; to ask one or two trusted loved ones for their insight and perspective on it; and make it your new year's resolution to begin seeking with God to address that

Maybe 2020 can be the year when we allow God to make us more like Christ than ever before!!

Amen.