

Growing in Favor
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Virginia Highland Church – Atlanta, Georgia
December 27, 2009
Texts: 1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2:41-52

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Our Gospel lesson today is the only story we have in the Bible that tells us something about Jesus as a child. And it is not a fantastic story like others that are not included in our canon or like the nativity stories themselves. It's a story that many a parent and many a child can understand from their own life experience.

The Holy Family goes to Jerusalem for the Passover as Jesus approaches coming of age as a Jewish male at the tender age of twelve. As a woman, Mary would not have been obliged to go, but may have done so out of devotion. After the festival, Mary and Joseph went a day's journey before they realized Jesus was missing. Today's parents might find this alarming, but in an era of extended families and tribal connections, they very well could have assumed he was safe with other family or tribal members.

When they could not find him, they returned to Jerusalem and searched for three days, a symbolic parallel to the three days Jesus would spend in the tomb. They found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and precociously asking questions. "And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers," Luke writes.

His parents too are astonished, and his mother takes him to task for being the cause of their "great anxiety." He surprises them by saying, "Didn't you know I'd be here in my Father's house?" The Gospel writer Luke says his folks didn't "get" it, but they returned to Nazareth with him, and he was obedient. And "his mother treasured all these things in her heart." In other words, she values and meditates on the significance of this story. "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor," Luke concludes his simple tale, paralleling the prophet and priest Samuel in our scripture from 1 Samuel: "Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people."

There are other parallels to Samuel. His mother, Hannah, prayed for a child which she promised to give to God for service in the temple. When she conceives, she glorifies God with a Psalm that is viewed as a basis for Mary's own Magnificat. Samuel comes to the service of his people, 1 Samuel declares, when his people had lost their vision. And Samuel was about the same age as Jesus.

Given that the Palestine of Jesus' time was under the thumb of the Roman Empire, and that those who were in power as his nativity story played out were either Romans or Jewish collaborators, we might assume this had been a period when his people's souls doubted their worth. On Christmas Eve I talked about the song "O Holy Night" and the phrase about Jesus' birth causing "the soul [to feel] its worth."

But Jesus' people were not without vision. They had a longing for deliverance from Roman oppression. "How long, O Lord," was their frequent cry. They were searching for a political messiah, and many a Jewish zealot had been crucified by the Romans along the roads leading to Jerusalem to dissuade rebellion. One might wonder if the people's vision was limited by their immediate needs, rather taking into account the needs of the whole world. I wonder if one of Jesus' questions of their religious leaders was about the relevance of their religion to the powers that be.

But we have no idea what Jesus was asking as a child, only the answers he arrived at as an adult. And those answers were not about a merely political solution to their problems, such as rebellion or revolution, but about a spiritual solution, such as conversion and transformation. Among Jesus' answers: Loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself was the sum of the Law. And the neighbor was anyone who needed your help, whether enemy or friend, Roman soldier or beloved disciple. Ritual purity was not as important as compassion, baptizing one's hands before eating or being careful who you eat with not as important as what comes out of your heart. The reign of God was breaking into the world, and was to be found already among us. Seek and you will find. Knock and it will be opened to you. Your faith will make you whole. Forgive even when others do not know what they are doing. Forgive even as you have been forgiven. Faith is like a tiny mustard seed in its ability to grow into something large and grand and beautiful. True worshipers will worship in spirit and truth; the forms of worship are not as spiritually vital as content.

This latter point is what our epistle lesson from Colossians is amplifying. The chief errors of the church at Colossae were an over-emphasis on ritual practices combined with esoteric philosophies. To correct this, the writer challenges the Colossians (and I'd invite you to hear this as if written to us): "holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Jesus."

What we have here is a kinder, gentler religion, one whose central command is to do good to others, humbly and gratefully before God. "Clothe yourselves with compassion ...clothe yourselves with love." That's what it meant for the early Christians to follow Jesus. That's what it means to grow in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

Not only did Jesus need to grow up, so did the church. But the church too often has mistaken a quest for divine and human favor as a quest for divine and human power. If Jesus had pursued divine and human power, he might've made history in a different way, but we would not be here following him, we would not be meditating on his life and teachings. He may have affected the political landscape of his time but not have so deeply changed the world. It is because he grew in divine and human favor rather than power that he became for us The Way.

And notice the balance of divine and human favor. Perhaps this is the mythological necessity for affirming Jesus' divinity as well as his humanity, even as we discover our own divinity and humanity. People who only pursue human favor may too readily compromise their principles, going along with human trends or fashions or whims, seeking popularity rather than what is right. And people who only pursue divine favor may too rigidly adhere to principles, even when those principles may compromise their compassion.

I believe the reason Jesus appeals to us is that he offers us spiritual direction with compassion. For most of us, he is not the all-powerful Creator in Genesis who commands the world into existence, though the Gospel writer John portrays him that way in the prologue to his gospel. He is not the Yahweh of Mt. Sinai whom we cannot look at for fear of being consumed, despite the fantastic story of the Transfiguration. He is not even the fierce and fiery God of the Final Judgment, though some Christians have understood him that way.

Rather, the story of Christmas and the story we heard on this first Sunday after Christmas about his childhood tells us that Jesus is more like us than any other divinity, born humbly, inquiring in the temple, listening for answers, then going home with his family. He's more like the disciples and apostles and saints who followed his way, who imitated his lifestyle, maturing in divine and human favor. Just as we discover our own nativity as holy and human in his nativity, so we too may grow in divine and human favor, as individuals and as a congregation. Let's clothe ourselves with compassion, let's clothe ourselves with love.