

Luke 2:41-52

Children Are Like Sponges

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Scripture

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. (NRSV)

Sermon

When I was a new mom, like most new moms, I wasn't getting much sleep. When I did get a chance to sleep, I slept hard and had the most persistent, realistic dreams I had ever had or have had since. I say dreams, but they were more like nightmares. Every time I fell asleep, I dreamt that I couldn't find the baby. Sometimes in my dreams I had forgotten where I had put him. Other times, someone had taken him. In one particularly vivid dream, I had gone to the store and left baby Christopher with a good friend who lived close to the store I was going to. When I went back to pick him up, my friend acted like I was crazy. She said that I hadn't left Christopher with her; he was not there. Every time I woke up from one of these dreams I was out of breath and absolutely terrified. I would always have to go look at him in his bed to convince myself the dream was only a dream.

Over the years, I have heard other parents talk about having dreams like this, especially in the first few sleep-deprived months of parenthood. It makes sense. For most parents, the thought of not knowing where our child is a pretty deep seeded fear, and it seems reasonable that fear could seep into our dreams. That's why, for many of us, the part of today's story, where we learn that it was a whole day before Mary and Joseph realized Jesus was not with them on their way home from Jerusalem to Nazareth, is the part that sticks with us. To our 21st century, western ears, *that* is the real story here. 12-year-old Jesus was not missed by his parents until after the first day's journey! What kind of a family is this Holy Family?

Mary and Joseph didn't miss him immediately because they were not traveling as a nuclear family, in their own minivan, just the three of them. They were traveling in a *caravan* (see what I did there) of extended family and friends. His parents had confidence that someone had their eyes on their, soon to be teenage, son. When they realized Jesus was not with the larger family group, they went back to Jerusalem and found him in the temple. I am sure the time between realizing he was not with them and finding him in the temple, was tense. When they found him, Mary asked Jesus why he would cause them to worry like that and he answered, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"

In other words, "Chill out, mother. I'm fine." I have a friend who says this is her least favorite Bible story because of that moment. She hates it that Jesus seems so disrespectful to his mother. I love it. I love it because he is 12. And that seems real to me. I was 12 once. My mom, given the opportunity, would love to tell you how I acted when I was 12. Jesus was a 12-year-old adolescent who was working on growing up. He was trying to figure out what it would mean for him to be a Jewish man one day.

You see, young Jesus was being raised in a faithful Jewish home. In Luke's gospel, we see that in the events described between Jesus' birth and the official start to his ministry in chapter 4. Eight days after his birth he was named and circumcised according to Jewish tradition. His parents presented him at the temple and offered a sacrifice. While there, Simeon came to the temple and declared Jesus, "a light for revelation to the Gentiles..." and the prophet, Anna, praised God and

talked to the people about this special child. Jesus and his family were firmly planted in traditional Judaism. That's what kind of family they were.

At 12, Jesus had been immersed in his parents' faith literally since the day he was born. He stayed at the temple to listen and to ask questions, to make sense of his faith on his own. This story marks the transition, in Luke's narrative, between what others said about Jesus (by others, I mean the angel Gabriel, the angels who announced Jesus' birth, Simeon, and Anna) ...the transition between what they said about Jesus, and his own words. We hear Jesus' voice for the first time and begin to understand how Jesus saw his relationship with God. That work Jesus was doing in the temple is work we all have to do in our own time, whether we are 12, 20, or 90. A life of faith is a life that is always asking and trying to answer, "Who is God to me?" and "Who am I to God?" In this text, Jesus answers "God is my parent and I belong to God. We are family."

God reveals Godself to each one of us in different ways, at different times. This week, as I reflected on the reaction of the people, including the teachers, who were "amazed at his understanding and his answers," I remembered times when a child has been able to say simply the thing I was trying to say using way too many words or times when a child's question, during a children's sermon in worship, caused everyone in the sanctuary to see something about God in a new way. Years ago, I was the youth minister at a Presbyterian church that was trying to tip-toe into a more progressive theology. I was talking, during a children's sermon, about how all families look different, but they are all held together by the same thing: love. I was using many words to talk to the children about same-sex couples when one of the children interrupted me and said, "I think what you mean is that some families have two moms or two dads and that's okay because we should all be minding our own business."

***SLIDE**

"Children are like sponges," they say. That child had been soaking up good stuff in her home and, hopefully, at church. We know that our children soak up the things that happen and the words that are said around them. And part of their own work, with help from people who love them, is to help them make sense of all that they take in. Really great, self-aware, parents are careful to help their children figure things out for themselves rather than telling them what they have to think or believe.

The same is true within faith communities. Churches that recognize that faith formation is not about indoctrinating young people, but about walking with them as they develop and own their own theology, are equipping children to rely on their faith to help them navigate the complexities of life. So, the question is, what do we, the church, and we, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, friends, and neighbors of the children in our lives, what do we want them soak up?

My answer to that is LOVE. You have heard me say to the children, over and over again, “There is nothing you can do or say that will change how big God’s love is for you.” That’s true, by the way, for all of us. And what a great thing for our children to soak up. I wonder...how would the world be different if every one of us internalized God’s big love? At some point in our individual faith journeys, we each decide what the foundation of our faith is, what the deal breaker is. My personal theology has, at its roots, the belief that God loves everyone, and that we can’t mess that up. I also believe our response to that love ought to be to love ourselves and each other with love like that.

I believe lots of other things too, but I refuse to believe anything that conflicts with that. So, when someone tries to use God or the Bible to keep members of the LGBTQ+ community on the outside, to devalue their relationships and their families, I reject that. Because the truth is, we cannot both love people and refuse to accept who they were created to be. Love creates space for everyone. Just as we cannot turn our backs on refugees and immigrants and claim we love them. Love welcomes the stranger. And we cannot deny the reality of the oppression experienced by our Black and brown siblings and claim we love them. Love honors lived experiences. These are the things we want our children to soak up. We want them to experience God’s love for them and know that God has that same love for all people. And we want to show them that the primary way we live out our faith is by making that love real.

I don’t know exactly what the teachers were saying to Jesus that day at the temple. I don’t know what questions he asked and how he answered their questions of him. It is likely the teachers were talking more about law than love. But it’s important to understand that in the Jewish tradition, law is love. Torah law governed how God’s people lived in community with God and with one another. Abiding by the law was what love looked like. I imagine, as he listened to

the teachers, Jesus wondered how far the limits of loving one's neighbors could be stretched. Maybe he even asked that question. I wonder if he thought about the times his dad repair had repaired something for a neighbor who had no way to pay him. Or the times his mom made bread and took it to the family down the road. He soaked it all up as a child. And as a grown man, he taught others, not only what he learned in the temple, but what he learned from watching his family and his neighbors.

Tomorrow our nation honors Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Since we are talking a bit about children today, I went in search of information about Dr. King as a child. I learned that he was a bit ornery, which made me happy, just as Jesus' sassiness delights me. As a young boy, Dr. King enjoyed frightening people who were walking down the street of his home in Atlanta, GA. He would tie one of his mom's fox furs to the end of a stick and poke it through a bush, so people thought there was an animal coming out of the bush after them. To get out of piano lessons, he and his younger brother tried — unsuccessfully — to scare away their instructor, loosening the hardware on the piano stool so it collapsed when the music teacher sat down. Young Martin "hated doing the dishes, loved ice cream and the board game Monopoly, and sometimes popped the heads off his sister's dolls to use them as baseballs."

https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/kidspost/what-was-martin-luther-king-jr-like-as-a-child-a-prankster-and-an-ordinary-kid/2017/01/13/391a384c-d853-11e6-9a36-1d296534b31e_story.html

Every night at supper he was required to recite a Bible verse before eating. His favorite? John 11:35, "Jesus wept."

I tell you these things about Dr. King so that we don't forget that each one of us, even the most courageous, articulate, faithful, and intelligent among us begins as a child, soaking up the words and actions of the world around us. Our job, Church, is to do everything we can to work for a world in which our children and our neighbors' children soak up messages of inclusion, anti-racism, community responsibility, justice, peacemaking, dignity, worth...all the things that will help them assemble a theology that causes them to love God, love their neighbors, and love themselves. You know, just like Jesus said. Amen.