

Junior Rabbi Jesus  
Luke 2:41-52  
Colebrook Congregational Church  
December 28, 2014

The church I grew up in had stained glass windows, one of which showed today's selection. It depicts what most artists do when they depict this scene in Jesus' life. A young Jesus standing authoritatively amongst a group of older men, teaching them the Torah. Thinking of that, I was initially reminded of one thing. An old television show called Doogie Howsler.

Back to Luke. It is very important to Luke that Jesus was reared according to Jewish laws and traditions. In this chapter alone, Jesus, Mary, & Joseph are described following the Law of Moses in some way five times. The chapter begins with the birth of Jesus, then Jesus is circumcised, Mary is purified, and Jesus is presented at the Temple. Then a holy man is moved by the Spirit to the Temple during Jesus' presentation, declaring him to be the Messiah.

Luke is the only Gospel to include anything from Jesus' childhood. Matthew has some from his infancy, where they escape from King Herod to Egypt, but only Luke brings up his childhood. Because of this, some early Christians wrote some stories about Jesus' childhood and teenage years to fill in the gap. They were attempting to glorify Jesus with elaborate stories. Luckily, when it was time to decide what should or should not be included in the Bible, these stories were not included!

There are good reasons why they are considered apocryphal. The one that fills in the gap in Matthew includes Jesus charming dragons, lions, and leopards; and then wrecking the countryside to find fruit and water. Can you imagine a moody child or teenager with the power of a god? The Infancy Gospel of Thomas fills the gap in Luke between the presentation and Jesus among the Rabbis. Those stories depict Jesus ending the life of two boys who accidentally offended him, transporting playmates on top of roofs, and

generally insulting and terrorizing teachers and the local populace. He is mean, callous, and bitter. He calls everyone he interacts with ignorant in various colorful ways.

Not the Jesus we know in the Bible. On top of the repulsive presentation of Jesus' personality, which alone would merit exclusion, the Gospels in the Bible agree that Jesus did not gain the divine powers until he was baptized by the Spirit as an adult. A smart move on God's part, I think!

Today's selection in Luke depicts Jesus in the exact opposite way, with the emphasis on Jesus' more human aspects and characteristics. After celebrating the festival, Jesus has separated himself from his family to stay at the Temple. Here's the thing though, the artists got it wrong! They have Jesus as the one teaching, but if you read it, he's not the one doing the teaching! He is there to learn! Luke says that Jesus was listening and asking questions; and that he had understanding and he impressed the rabbis with his intellect. The twelve year old boy Jesus did not go to Jerusalem with an overwhelming confidence to lay down the law, he went with eagerness, an open mind, and with a simplicity of Spirit, and the desire is to learn more.

Luke says he grew in wisdom, and was friendly, and cheery, which gained him friendliness, loyalty, and affection in return. The Gospels have Jesus constantly at feasts and other celebrations, surrounded by people listening to him talk and entertain and joke. Combine Luke's simplicity in his story of the Junior Rabbi Jesus with how Jesus was as an adult, and we can see a picture of someone who enjoyed life and having fun. When Jesus' opponents tried to slander him, one thing they focused on was this. They would call Jesus gluttonous, that he loves life's pleasures too much, and so on.

I read one commentator that had an interesting exposition on this story, focusing on how Jesus interacted with others. He read how Jesus was engaging and respectful to the rabbis and then the last verse says that as Jesus

grew in years, he grew in wisdom and in human favor. He read those verses and in light of how the Gospels describe adult Jesus, saw Jesus' personality as wanting warm interactions with those around him. He cautioned against overly formal piety or behavior, because they can cause barriers to form between people.

I can understand that. Back in seminary, there were pretty much three groups. The loud & obnoxious know-it-alls who were very arrogant in their bearing; all of us there were smart in our field...we had to be to get admitted to the school, but they were the show-offs. There were the dour students who took everything very seriously; every little thing was the most important and must be approached seriously and piously. And then there was the group I fit in: we smiled, we laughed, we were approachable, we had fun living.

The first group made me roll my eyes and move on. They kinda remind me of the personality of the apocryphal Jesus...without the insults or divine retribution, just the "I am smarter than thou" attitude. The second group, it was like there was a barrier between them and everyone else. If I needed to talk to them, I found that I had to speak differently, formally, and had to filter what I said to an extreme degree to get anywhere with them. Their attitude was "I am holier than thou." It reminds me of how the artists have depicted this episode in Jesus' life, the seriously pious boy expounding the Law amidst the adults. I was not at all comfortable around either group.

The rest of us, you could hear us laughing in the halls. Sure, we were serious in the classroom, but then we would go outside and have a snowball fight...well, the snowballs were mostly outside. We would be pious in the chapels, but then cracked jokes with donuts in the Common Room.

At first, I thought it was stress, and so I started an student group to address this, a group that organized activities to de-stress the student body. Well, the know-it-alls attended, and held court with their bragging. The overly pious

attended, but it felt like they were judging us. That was a wake-up call for me about their personalities.

This is the earliest episode in Jesus' life where we can actually see Jesus and his personality. Everything before this, Jesus is just a baby. And we see him as curious and inquisitive, as someone who can get along with others, someone who could earn the respect of others by being respectful and generally a good person, not by separating himself from others because he was holier, nor by being a show-off. We see him throughout the gospels as a person who loved life and got along with many other people.

If Jesus is the example of how we should live our lives, then we should be curious, explore, find beauty in Creation, but above all else, we should enjoy life.