

“A Higher Loyalty”:  
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)  
for December 30<sup>th</sup> 2018 (Christmas Sunday)  
by Foster Freed

Luke 2: 41-52

It never fails to catch me up short...

...never fails to come as something of a surprise...

...when we arrive at Christmas Sunday once every three years, to discover that what awaits us, by way of Gospel text, is this story of Jesus as a pre-teen making the annual Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem with his parents and other members of their extended circle of family and friends. There is something so marvellously un-Christmasy about this story, that is always feels somehow out of place as we gather for worship with all the decorations still in place...and no doubt with not a few of us still munching on left-overs from Christmas festivities! Mind you....

...mind you: it's not as if the Gospel readings offered the **other** two years are a joy-ride. Once every three years we are treated to the story—also from Luke's Gospel—in which the infant Jesus is brought to the Temple where he is warmly greeted by the aged Simeon and Anna. In so many ways that is a delightful episode until Simeon gets around to his prophecy that the infant in whom they are all taking delight will be a sign of contradiction, and that Mary's own soul will be pierced. Worse still, of course, is the year in which the Gospel reading for Christmas Sunday comes from Matthew: that portion of Matthew depicting the aftermath of the visit of the Magi, in which King Herod orders the slaughter of all the male children in Bethlehem, under the age of two. By contrast, this morning's reading is almost alarmingly cheerful although...

...unlike those other two readings, this one seems to be entirely out of place as we traverse the all-too-brief 12 days of Christmas. On the one hand, it is set during the Passover pilgrimage; in short, this story takes place in spring!! On the other hand, it involves Jesus not as an infant, not as a small child, but on the verge of reaching the age—the age of 13—at which Jewish scripture and Jewish tradition envisions a child becoming an adult: in other words that point at which the child (rather than his or her parents) is held accountable for their own choices, actions, way of life. In our culture the age of 13 is far from the age at which we would judge someone to be an adult; but in the culture of Jesus' time, 13 was—in fact—the time when a boy became a man. And so, while there may not be anything especially Christmas-like in this morning's tale, it represents a “snap-shot” so to speak, of Jesus as a youth: a “snap-shot” unlike anything else found in any of the four New Testament Gospels. And yes! Therein lies a tale.

It is worth noting...worth noting that there **are** other Gospels, Gospels that did not make their way into the New Testament. For some folks that is a major issue...a sense

that we are thereby cheated out of something important and valuable. Having read a handful of those Gospels, I am far from convinced. And I can say that the ones that have accounts of Jesus as a child or as a teenager, are far from edifying: often they present him as a spoiled-brat with magical powers with which he gladly chooses to zap those who displease him. I remain convinced that the early Church councils chose wisely when they chose to include Mark, Matthew, Luke and John...and **only** Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. But others disagree! So be it!!

What can safely be ventured is that this morning's reading involves the sole instance in which the New Testament presents Jesus in his formative years. Mark and John, in effect, begin their presentation of Jesus with his baptism as a fully formed adult. Matthew presents an account of his birth as well as the events surrounding the visit of the Magi: a visit which occurred no later than his second birthday. As for Luke...

...as for Luke...he alone—having movingly depicted the events surrounding Christ's conception and birth (as well as the conception and birth of John the Baptist), Luke then proceeds to include this one small episode: in which the 12-year old Jesus becomes separated from his parents during the annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the festival of Passover. The chronology laid out here by Luke appears to involve a critical three-days. On the first day—having made their pilgrimage—Joseph, Mary and their circle of family and friends, set out on the return trip to Nazareth. On the second day—having discovered that Jesus has somehow been left behind—they switch gears and head back to Jerusalem. Finally, on the third day—having apparently searched in all kinds of places—they discover him in the Temple, taking part in what appears to have been a lively theological conversation with elders in the Temple precinct. Expressing surprise when they finally come upon him, Jesus responds by saying that they ought not to have been surprised at all! We'll have a closer look at his response in a moment....but first:

First I want to note that it is entirely possible—and not at all inappropriate—to consider this episode from a strictly human perspective. More than appropriate to do so, since Luke here manages to capture one of the most painful and challenging transitions each and every human being must eventually undergo. Whether we view this episode from the perspective of the twelve-year-old Jesus, or from the perspective of his worried mother and father...there is no getting away from the fact that it depicts a moment that is bound to touch us all. We all remember those times...

...and yes, for most of us those are distant times!...

...when we, ourselves, discovered that we were not our parents, however much we may have respected and admired our parents. What then follows—often over the difficult and conflict-fraught space of a decade or more—is the gradual process by which a human being...

...here I'm going to use a fancy word often associated with the Swiss philosopher Carl Jung...

...what is depicted by Luke in this episode, is the start to that process of **individuation**: in short, the process by which an **individual** emerges. It is an absolutely necessary process; when it doesn't take place, it is a sign of future trouble for that person. But when it does take place—as it almost always does—it can produce all kinds of challenges for the “child” in the process of becoming an adult, as well as all kinds of unwelcome surprises for mom and dad, as they endure those changes and challenges. Luke, in what is really a brief episode, manages to suggest all of that taking place within the family circle of Mary, Joseph and their blessed child. And yes: if we hear echoes of our own experience as children coming of age...or as parents who attribute at least some of their grey hairs to having endured that process from their children...we are not misreading Luke's account. That having been said!

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It would be wrong-headed...

...it would be beyond wrong-headed, to pretend that there is not more at play in this episode, than a depiction of the process of individuation through which each and every human being must eventually pass. Luke includes this account not to provide a mirror for our own experience, much as it does provide something of such a mirror, but rather includes this account because it reveals something about the child whose birth we celebrated with such gusto on Monday evening. And I found it helpful this week...

...as I read through a terrific commentary on this story...

...I found it helpful to learn about a dispute that “form-critics” have entered into concerning this episode. Form criticism of the Gospels is an attempt at isolating small units of the Gospels and then classifying those small units in order to get a handle on what that particular text is trying to do for us and with us. The first form-critics—back in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—tended to regard this episode as a legend: as a beautiful story the early church cherished concerning Jesus.

Incidentally: the fact that they called this a legend tells us nothing, one way or the other, about the historical substance of this story. There are legends about Babe Ruth or Rocket Richard that happen to be factual. We know—with a fair degree of certainty—that Mary outlived her son by many decades. There is no reason to presume that this story—even if we call it a legend—is not grounded in a factual account. But let's not debate that this morning...because there is a far more important issue at play, having to do with a challenge made by **other** form critics as to whether it is entirely accurate to call this story a legend. You see: there is another story-form found throughout the Gospels, a form that is known as an apophthegm: a form in which a story is told as a way of highlighting a particular saying, generally a saying that comes from the lips of Jesus. For what it's worth, I am totally convinced that the words spoken here by Jesus are the point of the entire story. Indeed: if you own one of those Bibles in which the words of Jesus are found in red, when you get home this afternoon, pull down

that Bible, go to the start of Luke's Gospel, and look for the first part of Luke in which the words on the page are found to be in red...and yes: it will be the words with which Jesus responds to his parents in this powerful episode:

*And he said to them, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"* Did you not know? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?

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There is for me a sense...

...a sense in which Luke—by recounting this story—provides a perfect appetizer...

...a complete yet wonderfully succinct first-taste...

...to everything else he and the other three evangelists will show us concerning this Jesus. His is a "higher loyalty". Dismissive though he appears to be of his parents' concerns in his response to them, there can be no getting away from the fact that he is simply naming for their hearing what he will not hesitate to name for our hearing: that he begins and ends with his loyalty to God, and will not permit any other loyalty to detract from or diminish that first and ultimate loyalty. Go through any of the four Gospel accounts and you will encounter that over and over again: in the way in which he teaches and in the way in which he is depicted as living his every waking moment.

And I need to say: on occasions such as this, I am always struck by that phrase made popular through the courageous prison-witness of the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who died in a German concentration camp just hours before the end of the Second World War. Bonhoeffer, in one of his letters, described Jesus as the "man for others"...emphasizing that the heart of Christology, for our day and time, was to focus on Christ's determination to be "the man for others"...calling us, in our here and now, to follow in Christ's footsteps. Bonhoeffer, the laces of whose sandals I am not fit to tie, was not wrong with that assertion: an assertion that has made a huge impact on mainline Protestantism in general, and on the United Church of Canada in particular. Nevertheless...

...nevertheless, it is worth observing...an observation impossible to duck on a morning such as this...it is worth observing that Jesus' whole understanding of what it means to be the "man for others", is grounded in his determination—first and foremost—to be the "man for God." The man who—just prior to his 13<sup>th</sup> birthday—made it abundantly clear that his parents ought not to have been surprised to find him in "his Father's house." Which is why we always need to proceed with great care whenever we wish, in an uncritical fashion, to sign Jesus up for one of our human causes: whether it be those causes of the right or those causes of the left—liberal, conservative or

progressive—all of which will include elements that Jesus might well choose to endorse...but none of which would represent his starting point as the One who came to bless humanity not “with or without God”, but to provide those blessings that can only be understood when humanity looks to God—the living God!—as both its source and its destination: as its Creator...and as its ultimate home. And here’s the real punchline...here’s where the rubber hits the road for me.

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Much of that makes me terribly uncomfortable. I would be lying to you were I not to acknowledge that discomfort. As a parent I cringe when I hear the 12-year old Christ speak to Joseph and Mary as if they were idiots for not knowing where they would find him. And as a human being passionately concerned about the world in which I live—the world that has been inherited by my children, the world that will be inherited by my beloved grand-daughter...

...it is so easy for me, even as a child of the Church...

...to turn to this Jesus and say: “Who has time for any of that! We have a world to mend! We have a planet to heal! We have a future to carve out!” Which is why...

...which is why I need to be here this morning. To be reminded of his different loyalty: his higher loyalty. To be reminded of it...to be thrown for a bit of a loop by it...and to be shown that there are, for the life and witness of the Church...no shortcuts to understanding let alone seeking to bring healing...to this angry, crazy, seemingly spinning out of control world of ours. To be reminded that what we have to offer—as the Church—is best offered when its every thought and every deed is offered in reference to the One who is the source of all healing...the source of every blessing.

Which is to say that I for one—on this Christmas Sunday—am grateful that I get to hear from Christ’s lips not what I want to hear...but what I need to hear.

May it be so! In His blessed name. Amen.