



Christmas 2 (A)

[RCL] Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 84 or 84:1-8; Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a; Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23a or Luke 2:14-52 or Matthew 2:1-12

Do What Young Jesus Did: Listen and Ask Questions

It happens sometimes, even to responsible parents: The mother assumes the child is with the father; the father assumes the child is with the mother. When they compare notes, there is calling in every direction, searching in every direction, anxiety that keeps grasping their guts. *Where* is their child?

In today's gospel from Luke, Joseph and Mary discover their twelve year-old is missing. The list of places where he is not keeps growing. The list of neighbors and relatives and strangers who have not seen him keeps growing. These desperate parents take the long highway back to bustling Jerusalem from where they just came. Anxiety increases over many miles. They reach the grand city, look around for three seemingly endless days, before they catch sight of their missing son.

Where? In the sacred precincts of the temple. Their boy is as cool as a cucumber, sitting among the teachers. What's he doing there? Listening to the teachers. Asking them questions. How are people responding to their child? They are amazed, just amazed, at how well he handles himself in this circle of distinguished adults.

Jesus is oblivious to his parents' anxiety. Joseph falls into a heavy paternal silence. When Mary challenges her son, the boy is perplexed that his mother does not get it.

"Why were you searching for me?" he asks her. "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"

Yes, he feels right at home in that exalted place. It's all clear to the boy, with a clarity characteristic of twelve-year olds, but not their elders.

(Meditate some time, friends, on what the conversation must have been like on the trip back home between this son and his parents.)

Listening. Asking questions. What occupies Jesus as he sits among the teachers there in the temple is mature behavior that many of us advocate for but find hard to practice with integrity.

Listen!

Listen to designated teachers, but also to others who might have wisdom to offer you, whether or not they know it. Those who do good provide you with an example to imitate. Those who do wrong teach you also by offering an example to avoid. They can all be your teachers.

Disciplined listening turns us away from assuming that we know everything already, that the last word should always be ours. Disciplined listening turns us to the freedom that we always have more to learn, and it makes us able to learn it.

When we listen, there is still space available in our mind, in our heart, for unfamiliar truth to take up residence. Recognizing this can be a continuing reminder, an unending conversion.

But listening is not popular among us these days. The production of the unnecessary—including sounds, statements, or opinions—shows itself to be a massive industry, a frightening form of pollution to which, at best, we become deaf.

Silence that summons us truly to listen can make us uneasy. Anything but silence! Bring on the banal, if you must, our protection against enrichment.

Nowadays it seems that listening is scarce and becoming scarcer. Whatever their age or education or place, everybody's got an opinion, and everybody's willing to share theirs. But the blessed silence of someone listening is more than the simple absence of speech. It is a place where education can happen, where wisdom can appear. No guarantees; just possibilities!

Jesus not only listens; he asks questions—there in the temple at the age of twelve and on later occasions.

His questions unsettle many, including those made rich and powerful through their falsehoods. Others hear him gladly, even his questions sometimes cast as parables.

So this is a second lesson from Jesus: ask questions! Accept questioning as a road to holiness. Testify thereby that your knowledge remains incomplete. Testify also that further

learning remains always possible, and indeed available from others, even those far from perfect in their own knowledge.

By engaging others in conversation, by asking questions, it becomes possible to enlist anybody as your partner in progress. Those others may seem fools of the worst sort. Questioning then becomes a way to expose them as such. But if they are wise, or at least decent, the result can be an enrichment of any who listen.

This practice calls for some courage on our part. Brave action can change the world. So can costly questions, ones that heal rather than hurt others, questions that are brave in their own way. Sometimes a question becomes an invitation to awaken to the situation and live consistently by principles we've already embraced. Sometimes it is an invitation to rise to a decency formerly unfamiliar.

Questions and answers, when pursued with integrity, place parties in a vulnerable space where they face risk. Healthful change can come out of this encounter—even the first steps toward reconciliation.

Consider partners in any kind of close relationship. Can you imagine yourself in the midst of a heated argument with a person you love? You both believe you are right, and you are both set in your own truth. How can you prevent a breakup? Only by listening.

Today's gospel humbles us with a reminder that our discipleship invites us to prove loyal to all the parts of the Jesus story, even this single adolescent episode which seems to present Jesus as other than an obedient child. Yet we gain even from this unusual text, by learning to develop habits of listening and questioning that can prove transformative to ourselves and others.

By listening and asking questions, was Jesus learning or was he teaching? One can advocate for each position, but it seems that the answer must be that he was simultaneously both student and teacher here. Moreover, *what* he established, however briefly, that day in the temple, was what Parker Palmer in his book *To Know as We Are Known* refers to as “a space in which the community of truth is established.”

At its best (or close to its best), the church is a space in which the community of truth is established. One generation after another, one nation after another, persists in the questioning and listening Jesus modeled. Truth is never held captive for long; it cannot stay stuck, as though in some local amber.

Today's Christian communities—whatever their form—can once again imitate the young Jesus, who listened and questioned, feeling at home in his Father's house, in his Father's world. How can this listening and questioning become characteristic of our congregations?

How can we listen in a world that works hard to avoid hearing, preferring instead the closed ears of frightened people who wish to know it all already?

How can we ask questions of value when the world turns from them in favor of propaganda that leaves truth unexplored?

Jesus did so at twelve years of age and later. Thus he brought amazement to the world.
Surprise: We can do this, too!

In closing, let us sit with three simple suggestions to promote, in our time and place, the spirit presented in today's gospel:

- First, we can sit in circles rather than in arrangements that unnecessarily privilege some participants over others. Rearranging the furniture can sometimes have surprising results.
- Second, an agenda can be established to give adequate opportunity to the youngest, the newest, the least senior member, so that they do not lose their chance to speak simply because some of the group is more adept at working the system than others. The Holy Spirit is perfectly able to speak through the newest voices in the group as well as the familiar ones.
- Third, at appropriate junctures, each member of the group can take a turn in speaking or explicitly pass. This practice guarantees, especially when a session draws to its close, that no participant is overlooked, no precious wisdom lost, for often a treasure lies hidden.

Through practices such as these, the church can become more clearly the space it is meant to be: where the community of truth is established.

Prepare to be amazed!

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