

Sermon by Rev Paul Christopherson
Luke 2:41-52, Christmas II

St Andrew's, Kent
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The question of how early our character is formed is fascinating. When is enough of our personality set that we are destined to live the rest of our lives with that particular set of traits? I don't know, but I believe studies have shown it to be pretty early on. Arnold Schwarzenegger, for example, tells his co-star in "Kindergarten Cop" that he likes teaching kindergarten because he can still influence children at that age.

This morning's gospel shows us Jesus at age twelve. It is the only passage in the gospels that even mentions Jesus between his birth and age thirty or so; the time in between is otherwise hidden from us. It is also the first passage in the gospels when Jesus speaks.

This is the second Sunday in Christmas, the season when we focus on the Incarnation, the miracle of God made flesh. So, let's look at Christ the man, in particular the person the gospel this morning reveals to us.

When I picture Jesus in the temple, I see a profound humility. Here was the Son of God, after all, sitting at the feet of Rabbis. They were instructing him, and he was listening and asking questions and picking up on their answers. He knew his way around the Torah from his Nazareth synagogue school, but he was not hostile to experts; he sought them out.

Humility, that trait, along with honesty and decency and justice and truth and compassion and grace and dignity, that has gone missing today.

Jesus had respect for his teachers; he wanted to "increase in wisdom". Twenty years later, Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." He meant receptivity, and the door to receptivity is through humility, so let's talk about humility.

Jesus said, "Whoever wants to be first must be last." This verse and variants of it appear twice each in Matthew (ch 18,20); Mark (ch 9,10); and Luke (ch 9,22). So we know it is important, actually preeminent. I believe that in these verses, Jesus is telling us that humility is the greatest of all the virtues.

There is one recurring theme that runs through the great religions and philosophies, and that is humility. A renunciation of grandness, or even self-denial or asceticism, is the beginning of virtue. Meanwhile, pride is the original sin. Proverbs 11 says, "When pride comes, then comes disgrace; but wisdom is with the humble."

Humility is the essence of spiritual wisdom, just as pride is the original sin; it comes from being connected with God. It is a profound sense of our own importance being tied to everyone else's. Humility is the virtue from which love and compassion and reconciliation and charity and confession and inclusion and empathy and affection and mercy, and all the rest of it spring.

So, what makes Jesus' teaching on humility different? Partly, it is his emphasis on it, and the extreme importance he attaches to it: the last shall be first, and the first shall be last. That was revolutionary.

Jesus' own life was all about humility, from his humble birth, to washing his disciples' feet, to the most humbling experience of all, his crucifixion. And being baptized in the River Jordan by someone dressed in camel's hair who ate locusts. In fact, John showed that same humility when he said, "the one who is coming, I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal".

We remember the Beatitudes, at the start of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. He was trying to introduce a whole new state of being, a different spiritual condition, and he used the various Beatitudes to try to surround and describe and convey that ideal spirit. As such there is just one beatitude being described; it's just being described from different angles.

That ideal spirit includes and reflects all the individual qualities in the Beatitudes. And the quality that embraces and transcends all is humility. Letting go of all the insecurities and false complacency that come between us and God, and replacing it with naturalness. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." Humility is that special sign of God's grace.

It takes great personal security to achieve humility. How do we gain that kind of security? For Christians, it is in knowing that God loves us, which we know through his Son; that gives us that blessed security.

The most memorable humility passage in the gospels is Luke 14:7-14. "When you are invited to a banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, but go and sit down at the lowest place. When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, and you will be blessed."

We remember the story (Luke 18:9-14) of the two men who went to the temple, and one confidently came forward and said, God, here I am, and he was proud. He was saying to God, I'm here, so we're good. Another man came to the temple and hung back and said, God, I am a sinner, forgive me. Jesus says, "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

If there is one quality in all the Gospels that really gets Our Lord going, it is puffery; self-regard; self-approval; self-promotion; self-aggrandizement. A person with these qualities just does not get Christianity. That is when Jesus says, "Woe to you hypocrites!" It is not stealing or adultery or tax collecting that gets Jesus' dander up; it is pride.

Jesus is always responding to the lowly and the poor and the suffering and the innocent. He saves his harshest criticism for the pious and the proud and the high and mighty; he saves his angriest words for them.

Jesus loves all mankind. He loves us all, all the time, everybody. But he prefers the humble; he exalts the man at the back.

A final thought. Humility should never be thought of as weakness or passivity or submission. Jesus himself could be quite assertive when the occasion arose. Assertiveness and humility can and should go together. Jesus did not hesitate to tell people to step off, whether Pharisees or money-changers. It got him crucified.

But that kind of strength and courage came from humility; it was processed through it; it was tempered and informed by humility. That humility comes from the security of knowing that God loves us.

God be praised. Love your neighbor. Amen.