

Sermon by Rev. David Chevrier
December 31, 2006

BEING ABOUT GOD'S BUSINESS

Luke 2:41-50

Today's gospel reading about Jesus in the Temple when he was twelve years old, seems out of place chronologically on the Sunday between Christmas Day with its shepherds and angels, and Epiphany Sunday with its journey of the Magi and their presentation of gifts to the baby Jesus. But at Christmas it is important to remember that it is because of who Jesus was in his teaching and healing, his death and resurrection, that the Church decided to celebrate his birth. Today's gospel reading helps us put Christ's birth in the context of his mission and ministry. The story of the shepherds and angels give us the sense of holiness and mystery that is part of his life; but today's lesson reminds us of Jesus's humanity—he too had to struggle with parental misunderstanding; he too had to make choices about his place in the family, in the community of faith, and in the world.

This is the first time Jesus is disrespectful to his parents, but it will not be the last time. Later on we will read in Matthew, *"While he yet talked to the people, behold his mother and his brothers stood outside, desiring to speak with him. But (Jesus) answered, and said to the one who had told him, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?'"*

According to this story in Luke, when still a boy—twelve to be exact—he was taken by Mary and Joseph to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem. When the festivities were over, assuming that he was with the relatives and friends traveling together back to Galilee, his parents did not miss him until the end of full day's journey. And after what must have been a frantic search, they finally discovered him back in the Temple dialoguing – of all things – with the rabbis. Understandably annoyed, they rebuked him with harsh, stern words. But, with not so much as a single word of apology for the hours of worry that he had caused everybody, Jesus rebuked them right back: *"Did you not know that I must be about (God's) business?"*

In this instance, I think most of us would side with Jesus, knowing the larger purpose and greater destiny that claims him. And we might recall his own words spoken many years later:

“Suffer the little children to come to me and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven.”

Not that children are superior in every respect, as even the best parents would acknowledge, and as St. Paul recognized when he said:

“When I was a child I spoke like a child, I understood like a child, I thought like a child; but when I became mature I put away childish things.” (Unlike the current occupant in the White House) *1 Corinthians 12:11*. But if there is nothing commendable (or attractive) about being immature and child-ish as an adult, *it is absolutely indispensable to remain, throughout all of life, child-LIKE.*

“Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”

God knows, I doubt if we will ever fathom the depth and profundity of that extraordinary statement. But in my own all-too-fallible and subjective judgment, I think Jesus is referring not only to the natural humility of children, their trusting nature, and their glorious capacity to wonder (which many of us witnessed over Christmas!); but Jesus is also referring to the *natural idealism of children*. Idealism is child-like: it is hoping for the best and believing that it can happen if everyone just tries harder.

In perhaps what is the shortest story ever written, Steven Kellogg writes a *one-line, two-picture story* which I want to share with you . . . The first picture is a drawing of two children reading a story together with their dog and cat and stuffed animals around them, and one child says to the other, *“If everyone has the same dream . . .”* and on the next page – full of all kinds of animals – leopards and deer, lions and monkeys, panthers and ant-eaters, cheetahs and koala bears – all gathered around some smiling, sleeping children – it reads . . . *“it might come true.”* “I have a dream . . .”

After all, it's kids who want to save the whales and dolphins, and the rest of us along with them. And we, the adults, encourage them. But we also expect them to outgrow their idealism, as if idealism were a pair of short pants. Ellen Goodman in one of her columns several years ago described it well: “We instill ideals in our children,

resent it when they challenge us for not living up to them, and then feel reassured when they give up their ideals, like sleds or cartoons.” And why do we make children the repositories of our ideals? Because, says Goodman, *children are powerless to implement them*. That way we can have our ideals and ignore them.

But let’s return to the passage: Mary was only being a typical parent when she stayed outside the synagogue, not venturing in to hear what her extraordinary son had to say. They came to take him back to a sensible family life in Nazareth where there must have been a backlog of unfinished orders waiting to be filled by a good carpenter’s apprentice like Jesus. Mary and Joseph thought that Jesus was being disobedient when in fact he was obeying the will of God, his Father/Mother.

Back to Ellen Goodman: “We raise our children with ethical time-bombs, built-in disillusionment alarms. We allow them their ideals until they are 14 or 18. But if they don’t let go, we worry about whether they will be able to function in the real world. It’s all quite mad. We regard toughness as adult, cynicism as grown-up.”

“We adults know that clean air is nice, but it must be balanced against jobs. Adults know that helping others is neat, but it may take away their motivation . . . Adults know that war is to be feared, but so is the fear of war. Adults know that children should have proper health care, but only if costs are contained.”

“Whosoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child shall not enter it.” Remember that it was on his way to Jerusalem to die that Jesus stopped to say those words? He knew what was coming. He had no illusions about the world’s imperfections. But he protested and fought them, unlike “mature” adults who only deplore them. No wonder Jesus never said, *“Suffer the grown-ups to come to me.”* Will we just deplore all the budget cuts on children’s programs or will we take a minute to call our elected officials on Monday to tell them to restore the cuts, stop the genocide in Darfur, and end the slaughter in Iraq by getting out? Volunteer an hour a week to get Joe Moore re-elected to City Council, to ensure some integrity!

“Did you not know that I must be about the business of my heavenly Father/Mother?”

“But you were always a good man of business, Jacob,” stammered Ebenezer Scrooge, who now began to apply this to himself. *“Business!”* cried Jacob Marley, the

ghost of Scrooge's former partner, wringing his hands again. *"Humanity was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence were all my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!"* Ken Ley and Tom Delay must have missed that scene!

Whether you saw Alistair Sims or some other actor at the Goodman as Scrooge in Dickens' Christmas Carol, remember, Scrooge was **saved** by a ghost. The psalmist advises us that ***"The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom,"*** so I guess a ghost is also a good beginning. My only fear this Christmas season is that there are not enough ghosts to go around to save all the Scrooges in the United States. The 5% that could give a shit about the bottom 50%.

"Did you not know that I must be about the business of my Father/Mother?"

*"Being about the business of our Father/Mother" that is the work of Christmas. The great African-American scholar, preacher, mystic, and poet, Howard Thurman, has this to say about the work of Christmas: (If you want to follow along with me, you can find the words in the black hymnal – on page 584 in *The New Century Hymnal*, or on the cover of the bulletin) In fact, let's read it together:*

“When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the (magi) and shepherds have found their way home,
The work of Christmas is begun.
To find the lost and the lonely one,
To heal the broken soul with love,
To feed the hungry children with warmth and good food,
To feel the earth below, the sky above!
To free the prisoner from all chains,
To make the powerful care,
Build the nations with strength of good will,
To see all God's children everywhere!

To bring hope to every task you do,
Dance at a baby's new birth,
To make music in an old person's heart,
And sing to the colors of the earth!"

The business of the Church – which is the Body of Christ – is to be about the business of our heavenly Father/Mother. So, let us go ahead and outgrow our childishness, but let us never cease to be childlike. And how can we keep our childlike idealism during these trying, difficult, challenging times? By remembering what Bill Coffin said many times, that *“love is a long-distance runner.”*

And one other thing: Listen for some ghost to whisper – because even a ghost wouldn't speak very loud on this subject: *“Maybe a decline in our standard of living, or ending our occupation of Iraq, might not be that great a catastrophe. Maybe it might be our salvation?”*

A month from now, you all will gather together for the annual Congregational Meeting. Will it be to conduct the business of Wellington Avenue United Church of Christ, or the business of our heavenly Father/Mother? Over the next four Sundays, the lectionary will help you discern what the business of the Body of Christ is. Celebrating the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. will also help greatly in helping to see straight!

It is much easier to adore a helpless child than to follow a childlike Christ. But this Christmas passage calls us to dedicate ourselves to reincarnate the purposes of God in the world – to be about the business of our heavenly Father/Mother. So let us not return tomorrow and in the year ahead to business as usual, but to business as never before . . .