

The Boy, Jesus
Luke 2:41-52
January 29, 2012

I've told this story before but when has that ever stopped me from telling a story again? When I was little, I'm guessing maybe seven, my family was sitting at the dinner table sharing our evening meal. As usual, I was sitting and fidgeting. However, somehow that night, my usual rate of fidgeting was greatly increased. Finally, my mother looked at me and asked, "Mark...what's wrong?" There were all sorts of possibilities: do you need to go to the bathroom; are you excited about desert; do you have something you want to say? I don't think anyone was expecting the answer I offered: "I need to dig a hole!" The silence at the dinner table was deafening.

Then, after that interlude, my father stood up and told me to come with him. We went downstairs and found the shovel. We walked back up the stairs, out the front door and behind the shrubs in front of the house. My father eyed me up, handed me the shovel and said: "Do what you need to do."

I dug my hole. Given that we lived in St. Louis at the time and the ground was hard packed clay and I was seven, this was no easy achievement. I grunted and sweated. I jumped up and down on that shovel until the ground broke a little more. I'm not sure how I knew it but eventually I just knew that my job was complete. I walked back inside (I'm sure covered from head to toe in dirt!) and stood in front of my family who were all still sitting at the table (and, I'm sure, were all working hard to restrain the giggles!) I looked them in the eye and said, "I'm done with my hole now."

My father came outside with me. He stood there for a moment. He leaned over for a closer inspection. He looked me in the eye and said, "That's a nice hole...Now you need to fill it back

in.” I picked the shovel back up. I grunted and I sweated. I shoved the dirt around with all my seven-year-old might. Then, to make sure the job was done right, I jumped up and down on that loose dirt until it was as tightly packed as all the other dirt around it. I went back into the house with a big smile on my face. I’m pretty sure the next words spoken were my mother’s: “Time for a bath!”

Sometimes a man has to do what a man has to do. Of course, sometimes, a woman has to do what she has to do, too. Whether we are parenting and eyeing up our children or whether we are married and eyeing up our spouse or whether we are simply eyeing up a friend, every now and then, those people we love need to do something that may not make sense to us or might not be what we would choose to do. Have you ever loved those people enough to give them the space to do whatever that thing they need to do might be? Have you ever gone and helped them “find the shovel?” Have you ever looked them in the eye and said, “Hey...that’s an excellent hole you just dug.”

Now, having walked this far with this idea in mind, listen to our text from Luke. Prior to this, Luke has given us “snapshots” of moments that preceded Jesus’ birth, of his birth and those who visited, and, in our text for last week, of two moments in his earliest days after his birth. Now, the clock has rolled ahead twelve years. In our text for this morning, Luke offers us the only “snapshot” of Jesus as a child.

In fact, in his own culture’s eyes, Jesus is right on the cusp of being considered a man. In that ancient world, an infant boy would have been raised by his mother almost exclusively until the age of twelve, at which point the boy would have become his father’s responsibility. It was considered the father’s job to introduce the boy to the “man’s world.” Largely, this would have been an

occupational focus as almost all sons assumed their father's occupation. In addition, though, this would have included religious instruction.

So, at this crucial age, Jesus and his family go to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem which, Luke tells us, was their custom. Like Times Square on New Year's Eve, Jerusalem would have been the place to be. The crowds would have been huge. In addition, though, from a religious standpoint, the trip would have been considered a kind of pilgrimage to celebrate a very sacred holiday at the most sacred place. It would not have been a quick trip from Nazareth to Jerusalem. It would have been a real sacrifice of time and energy. It also would have been a dangerous trip. The roads to Jerusalem were surrounded by thieves, waiting to prey on the pilgrims. (Perhaps that's why the Good Samaritan parable Jesus would tell years later, a story about a person being robbed and beaten and left by the side of the road, came to mind so quickly!) For safety reasons, pilgrims traveled together in large groups that the robbers would have hesitated to attack.

It might have seemed crazy to someone else to even take such a trip and assume those risks, however, the funny thing about "the things we have to do" is that when the urge to do those things is a shared urge with those we love, it seems so much easier to just go ahead and do them. Joseph and Mary had friends and family that would be making the trip with them. Off they went. Luke doesn't tell us about the trip there. (It must have gone fine.) Luke doesn't tell us about the actual festival. (Again, things must have come off without a hitch.) What he does tell us is that after Joseph and Mary had traveled for a day, they realized that they hadn't seen Jesus for quite a while. They just assumed he was with them. The text doesn't tell us who went back to Jerusalem to search for him, although I suspect Joseph and Mary may not have had a lot of

company on the way back. This, of course would have put them at risk with those thieves. Not only did they get all the way back to Jerusalem with no sign of Jesus, Luke tells us they searched and couldn't find him for three days.

Finally, in what must have seemed like the last place to look for a twelve year old boy, they found him at the temple. He was sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions and offering up his own answers. Luke tells us that everyone who heard his answers were "astonished." Actually, anyone who saw the scene would have been amazed about all sorts of things. It would have been amazing that the boy was sitting among the teachers. To be seated with the teachers would have been to be treated as a peer. The authorities were always certain to make sure that no normal person was included in that way. Folks would have been amazed that the boy was allowed to ask questions. Everyone knew that their job when the teachers spoke was to be quiet and listen, especially a child. People would have been amazed at the boy's boldness to actually offer answers of his own. Generally, the reaction would have been, "Why in the world would anyone care what this child had to say?" Yet, despite all the odds against him, folks heard the answers he offered up and were astonished at what he had to say. This young boy had a real mind of his own!

Which, of course, was exactly Mary and Joseph's problem. If there was an authority that a young boy/man would have been expected to respect in addition to the authorities at the temple, it would have been to respect his parents. Mary and Joseph hardly saw what was happening at all. I bet they didn't hear a word of a single answer. Instead, they are furious. It is Mary who speaks, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." How could you do this to us? We've been worried about you. We've put ourselves at

risk. Your job is to obey us and you just walked away. How could you treat us this way?

The interesting thing is that Luke doesn't give us a chance to hear a single question or answer that Jesus offered to the authorities at the temple either. Wouldn't you like to hear that tape? Instead, we know where Jesus has been and what he's been doing. We get to hear what his parents have to say and how they've experienced what's gone on. Then, we finally, for the very first time, get to hear what Jesus has to say. He looks his mother and father in the eye and says, "What's the big deal? Why were you looking all over the place. Didn't you know that I would be in my Father's house? Chill out, Mom and Dad!" (Okay...so maybe that's a slightly enhanced quote!) In essence, Jesus says to his parents, "I've been home the whole time!" He was doing what he had to do. He was being who (and where) he needed to be.

Mary and Joseph are stopped dead in their tracks. What kind of smart alec answer was that? But wait... it had been twelve years but there had been those moments long ago: Angels and shepherds, Simeon and Anna at the temple. Those words of Simeon were still there somewhere in Mary's heart: "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed--and a sword will pierce your own soul too." Simeon had told them that this child would one day break their hearts. For so many years he had just been Mary's little boy. In her own way, she had held on to the hope that somehow those words would not come true. What if it was starting now? What if all those predictions were coming true? Mary worked hard to put such thoughts away deep in her heart which is what we do when we see things unfolding around us that we just plain don't want to be true. It helped a lot in that moment that Jesus stood up and returned to being obedient to them,

following them all the way home. And of for the next 18 years, Luke tells us, “Jesus increased in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favor.”

Of course the question was yet to be answered whether Joseph and Mary would one day love him enough to let him go and do what God was calling him to do. Would you? He would put himself and those he loved at risk. He would one day return for Passover to Jerusalem with his followers. Instead of finding the temple to be his Father’s home, he would find it corrupted and kick over the money changers’ tables. Instead of sitting among the teachers, he would be arrested and sentenced to die--at least conceivably--by some of those very same men. And following his death, those who loved him most would search for three days until they would find him again.

Have you ever loved someone enough to let them do what they needed to do, even if it doesn’t make any sense to you, even if it puts them and you at risk? May God help us all to understand what it means to love and let go.