

'TWEEN

December 29, 2024 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Karen McArthur

Texts: 1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Luke 2:41-52

What do you remember about when you were twelve? Were there hints of the adult you that came to light? You were old enough to have a bit of independence, but too young to have adult responsibilities. What do we learn from that time between?

I grew up in the 60s and 70s in a suburb of Minneapolis that was mostly residential, with homes and lawns, and neighborhood elementary schools. It was the tail end of the Baby Boom, so our 1st – 6th grade school was filled beyond its capacity, with the kindergartners bused to overflow classrooms on the other side of town.

Each day when school was out, our teachers sent us on our way. Those who lived within a mile or so walked home, alone or with their neighbor friends, and our custodians drove the buses for those who lived further away. We lived a block from the school, so we walked home. When I was in fifth grade, I was on school patrol, which meant that I stood on the corner with my official black leather school patrol belt and orange flag. Each day before and after school, four of us, aged 10-12, stopped the traffic so our classmates could cross the street. One day, my 3rd grade brother came to the school corner with his friend Titus. He said that Titus had missed his bus, and didn't know how to get home, but Mark knew where he lived, so he was going to walk him to his house, and then would be home after that. That seemed reasonable to me.

When I got home, I relayed the message to my mom. She became frantic – he was 8 years old, and Titus lived more than a mile away. Why hadn't I told him he couldn't do that? She told me to wait at home, and drove off to look for him. She was gone for a while. First, she drove to Titus' house, but didn't find my brother. Then she started driving up and down the streets in the area. She finally found him on his way home, walking by himself, carefully along the edge of the street. "Mom, what are you doing here?"

He knew how to get to Titus' house because of the route the kindergarten bus had taken, three years earlier. Of course, the bus route wasn't direct – with stops on every corner, it was more like those "Family Circus" comics, where the wandering dotted-line pathways of a child are most definitely not a direct path from A to B. My brother had covered quite a bit of ground that day. All's well that ends well, but I can't read today's gospel without empathizing with Jesus' parents. Twelve-year-old Jesus was surprised by his parents' arrival: "Mom, Dad, what are you doing here?"

I did a bit of a dive into the Greek word that Luke chose here. While the NRSV translates the verse as: "Your father and I have been anxiously looking for you." The King James Version says "behold, thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing." Neither of those adequately capture Luke's meaning. The Greek word is translated as "grinding pain" – it apparently comes from the word for tooth – as in the searing, grinding pain that a tooth can sometimes cause. If you've ever had a toothache, you know that "anxiously" or "sorrowing" doesn't cut it. "Panicked" is more like it. The Message version maybe gets it best: "Young man, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been half out of our minds looking for you." We've all been there – either ourselves when we were that age, becoming

independent, sometimes more than is safe. Or as parents, when we didn't know where one of our children was, and we know what Luke names as "grinding pain."

Back in Jesus' day, families were larger and more extended. I can imagine the scene, thinking that Jesus was with the group as they set out on the 90-mile journey home. It wasn't along a highway built for vehicles, but a pathway worn by thousands of feet, journeying from town to town. As faithful people, they walked those roads from Nazareth to the city of Jerusalem and the Temple each year, for the festival of the Passover, for more than a thousand years, as our scripture from 1 Samuel reminds us. Even as a child, Jesus knew the routine, as his family came every year, for as long as he could remember.

It must have been exciting. The usual population of the city was about 40,000 – but it grew to 100,000 during the festivals. Just getting away from the regular routines and usual neighbors can be refreshing and exciting. Not only did they experience Jerusalem, but Jerusalem benefitted from the multitudes who came.

Here's where another deep dive into Luke's choice of vocabulary gets interesting. While his family was walking home, Jesus was still in the Temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, hearing – using the Greek word that is the basis for our word acoustic, with connotations of absorbing and resonating. Jesus was hearing and questioning. Like the Inuit who have dozens of words for snow, Greek has a multitude of words for teaching, learning, and questioning. The Greek word that Luke chose begins with the basic type of questioning among equals, but then adds the prefix "epi", which means "on" or "upon," which changes its meaning. This isn't the kind of questioning that asks for answers. It's the type of questioning that asks, "have you thought about this aspect?" It's the kind of questioning that invites deeper exploration. Apparently, there's an intriguing ancient association between the vocabulary of teeth and of learning – not just absorbing information, but biting it, chewing it, so that it might be digested and become energizing. Sharpening our knowledge. Who knew? Jesus was twelve. He had grown beyond the simple yes/no questions or questions that had definitive answers. And he was so fascinated, so captivated that he missed his bus home.

A day later, when they realize that Jesus isn't with them, his parents break off from the safety of their group, and turn back to Jerusalem, for another day's journey, this time against the traffic. They arrive back at the Temple and find Jesus, sitting in the midst of the teachers, listening to them, and questioning them. All's well that ends well. Luke tells us that after that, Jesus was obedient to his parents. Jesus' family must have told and re-told the story of inadvertently leaving Jesus in Jerusalem, year after year on their journeys for the festivals. Or as Luke put it, Mary "treasured all these things in her heart."

We've all had those moments in our adolescence where we've found someone who understands us better than our own family, those moments when we see something and think: that's what I want to do! They are important moments. Was this such a moment for Jesus? Sometimes we recognize them as life-changing moments right away, but other times, it's only in retrospect that we recognize the significance of the moment. Peter recently posted a photo from his early high school years, at the piano in front of the chorus. Or Pete Souza tells the story of being about 8 when he cut out the newspaper photo of LBJ taking the oath of office on Air Force One after President Kennedy was killed – and it inspired him on his journey to becoming the White House photographer himself. Or my

Facebook feed has shown me Christmas morning photos of a young Taylor Swift receiving a guitar, or of a tiny Caitlin Clark dribbling a basketball through a swarm of other players.

What were those moments for you? Did you have a time when you saw the world differently than your parents did? Those moments when questions made way not for answer, but for more and deeper questions. Curiosity. Walt Whitman said, “Be curious, not judgmental.” Neil deGrasse Tyson said that “people who don’t ask questions remain clueless throughout their lives.” Walt Disney said that “We keep moving forward, opening new doors, and doing new things, because we’re curious and curiosity keeps leading us down new paths.” What does curiosity do for us?

This week, I read about a recent study of adults over the age of 75 who were sent out for a walk once a week for eight weeks. One group had no specific instructions, while the other group was invited to look for a place where they might feel a little child-like wonder. “Look at small things, look at big things, and just follow the sense of mystery and wonder.”¹ Look for the sunsets, the intricacy of a flower, the kindness or generosity of others. In just eight weeks, the group who were guided towards finding awe and wonder on their walks felt less pain and less distress than the control group who were just walking. The researchers explained that there is a region of our brain that is preoccupied with ourselves – our goals, our lists, our sense of time and all that we have to do. However, when we experience “awe”, this part of our brain deactivates, making space for the part of our brain that slows our heart rate, boosts our immune system, and opens us up to things bigger than ourselves. Curiosity and awe can literally make us healthier.

For Jesus, that curiosity became a hallmark of his ministry, one that was observed in him even at the young age of twelve. He constantly asked questions, and responded not with answers, but with his own questions. A lawyer asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” and Jesus asks, “what is written in the law?” When someone asked, “Who is my neighbor?”, Jesus responds with the story of a good Samaritan and asks, “who was a neighbor to the man who was robbed?” Martin Copenhaver counts 183 questions that people asked Jesus, three that he answered, and 307 questions that Jesus himself asked.

As we journey through this Christmas season, awaiting the return of the light and the arrival of the magi, we have no idea what this new year will bring. If you’re like me, you’d prefer to stay right here, pre-January 20 in this in-between time in the Biden/Harris administration. We are anxious, and maybe a bit panicked, with moments of teeth-grinding pain.

In response, I invite you to be curious. Wonder. Ask the kind of questions that expand your sense of awe and the majesty of the world. And always remember, whatever the new year brings, we are in this together. Together with Jesus. Together with each other. Together with all God’s people.

And, as a word of benediction, liturgist Dave McCann shares the last line of a poem composed by a 16th century Korean woman, Hwang Chini:

명월이 만공산 하니 수여간들 었더라

The bright moon fills these empty hills,

So why not pause? Then go on, if you will.

¹ Dacher Keltner, professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley

May we each find awe and wonder as we pause in between: at the end of the old year and beginning of the new. Amen.

