

2nd Sunday after Christmas, Yr. A, B, C
January 3, 2010
Preached by Furman Buchanan
St. Martins in the Fields
1518 words

Lessons:
Psalm 84
Jeremiah 31:7-14
Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a
Luke 2:41-52

When your child is missing, nothing else matters.

A whole day into the journey back home to Nazareth, Joseph and Mary realize Jesus is missing. It is not hard to imagine them hiking desperately back up the road to Jerusalem exchanging the usual, “I thought *you* had him.” kinds of blame, or worse—the kind of cold, extended silence that carries the full weight of judgment and desperation like only silence can carry.

If this were not bad enough, St. Luke—in a clever bit of foreshadowing—lets us know that even when Mary and Joseph got to the big city of Jerusalem, it was still three days before Jesus emerged from the tomb that his parents had undoubtedly imagined as the worst case scenario.

We know that Joseph and Mary were faithful Jews—they made this long trek every year for the Festival of the Passover. Still—one wonders what details Luke may have left out when Mary scolds her boy—“Why have you treated us like this?” We have been worried sick about you!”¹

What worries you most about your children or your grandchildren? Do you fear for their safety when they are exposed to dangers at school or driving in the car or just hanging out with friends? Do you feel powerless—like Mary and Joseph—in spite of your cell phones and text messages? Does the fact that our children carry these devices suggest something about our level of fear as parents?

Incidentally, a healthy sense of fear is not a bad thing...it’s just not *everything*. Try as we might to protect our children and teenagers and college students from others—or even from themselves—at some point, like Mary and Joseph, we find ourselves powerless, and we hate that feeling of powerlessness, don’t we? It’s that dreadful moment when we discover that something’s wrong, and there’s nothing we can do to fix it right away.

It might take days, or weeks, or even years to set things right. And, in rare cases, we don’t ever have the power to set things right the way we wish that we could.

Last October, I took ten of our youth to New York City. Perhaps as an expression of my own fear, I also took two other adults along. I had two simple rules for the kids—don’t wander off (like Jesus did in today’s Gospel), and be careful when you cross the street (at least Mary and Joseph did *not* have to worry about New York City taxi drivers).

I would not trade anything for the experience of introducing these young people to new experiences—for some, flying on an airplane was new, for others, New York City was new, for all of them, praying, worshipping and walking the labyrinth at St. John the Divine Cathedral was new, as was serving a meal to persons living with AIDS and HIV. I was like one of the teachers in today’s Gospel lesson—I was just amazed by these young people and their faithfulness.

In fact, I am continually amazed by our young people. Not because they’re perfect—they are not perfect (just like the rest of us). I’m amazed because I see their strong appetites for learning *about* their faith and living *out* their faith.

¹ My paraphrase of Luke 2:48.

I don't seriously expect a teenager to study a challenging theological book when she won't be graded on it, but that is happening here at St. Martin's. I don't expect our teens to hang around after three days of demanding work, and show up for an extra day of grungy tasks at one of the Homeworks houses even though they completed what they signed up for, but that happened this week at St. Martin's. I don't expect a young person to read 1200 pages of *Les Miserables* just because I casually recommended it as some of the best Christian fiction ever written, but that is happening here at St. Martin's. I don't really expect our youth to be interested in going to a violent Holy Land to walk where Jesus walked, or to serve the poor in a less developed country where their own assumptions and lifestyles will be challenged, but there is a hunger among our young people to do these things.

It should not come as a surprise to you that during the last eighteen months I have read a lot of parish profiles. It also should not come as a surprise that virtually every parish profile being written in the Church today—including our own parish profile—says something to the effect that (quote) “ we want to attract more young families with children and more young people into our congregation.”

There is at least an implicit assumption in many of these profiles that if only the parish can hire just the right rector, this problem will be solved once and for all. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Our children and youth do not need razzle dazzle rectors, or hip youth pastors, or even an assistant rector with responsibility for youth ministry. Our children and youth need the same exact thing that Jesus needed—faithful parents who show up and who model what faithful living looks like for their kids, and they need a faith community that is committed and accessible so that our young people can be nurtured and inspired for days *without* their parents nearby.

I want you to hear very clearly that I am not complaining to you about a lack of parental involvement or adult volunteers in our ministry to children and youth. In fact, we have many volunteers who cover most all of the volunteer slots—from teachers to coaches to coordinators. What I am challenging you to consider are the things we are *not* presently doing and all the children and youth we are *not* presently serving in our faithful witness.

If the Hensley's had the foresight to make a generous bequest to fund Christian educational opportunities for parishioners of St. Martin's, what might happen if we endowed an annual pilgrimage for a young person, or even a family, to go to Jerusalem and be formed in the ways that Jesus, Mary and Joseph were formed. Or for a team of youth to go out beyond their comfort zones to seek and serve Christ among the poor at home and around the world—where Christ told us he is always served.

What might happen if we joined with other partners in the diocese and hosted a summer institute for spirituality and creativity with young people. You know, colleges and universities have discovered that summer camps and institutes are a great way to attract future students. When will the Church figure out that these intensive opportunities for formation and fellowship are also a great way to attract those 'future Christians' that every congregation so desperately seeks?

What might happen if we built a comprehensive, after school center that became the national model for parishes that are literally across the street from middle schools. Not only a safe space for children, but an environment supported by volunteers who would teach and inspire students so that, like Jesus, they would not want to leave!

We have all the financial, volunteer and creative resources we need within this parish to generate these kinds of sparks and to move beyond a business-as-usual model and embrace the kind of active mentoring today's Gospel describes.

This is more than a job that can be done by a youth pastor, or a children's coordinator, or a rector or a vestry, or one or two generous donors. This is a job that the entire faith community must embrace.

It is time for us to be awakened to our missing children *and* to what our children are missing. It is time for us to stop feeling powerless to do anything about it. It is time for us to do what the Church is called to do—seek and serve others—to be the community of faith that surrounds children and young people with an abundance of love, nurture and inspiration.

You know how the Gospel story ends. Jesus returns home with his parents, and he was obedient. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.²

We are the actors in this 21st century faith story. Jesus will not do this *for us*, but he will most certainly do this *with us*. Will we treasure these things in *our* hearts? Will *our* children increase in wisdom as well as in years? Will *our* children grow in divine as well as human favor?

I can assure you they will no do it alone. They need us as much right now as the Church will need them in the next generation.

The really good news is that our children and youth are both eager and amazing, much like Jesus was when he was twelve years old. And we are nowhere near powerless to make an amazingly positive difference for our children and youth...for Christ's sake and for their sake.

Amen.

² Luke 2:51-52