

2nd Christmas. January 3, 2021.
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What Jesus Learned
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

I'm sure every parent has a memory of when an attempt to discipline their child took an unexpected turn. Perhaps some of us share such a memory with our parents, but from the child's point of view. I have one like that from the day I learned my full name.

As I remember it, I must have been about two years old, I was playing quite contentedly when I heard my mom start yelling in another part of the house. I was old enough to understand she was upset about something and was yelling for someone named Deborah Jean Woolsey. I can distinctly remember thinking to myself, "I don't know who that is, but whoever she is, she's in trouble." That's when my mom came into the room where I was playing and said something that surprised me: "What are you doing in here? Didn't you hear me calling for you?"

Without missing a beat, I calmly replied to my mother, "My name is Debbie, you were calling for someone named Deborah Jean Woolsey."

"That's you," my astonished mother replied, "Don't you know your own name?"

Again, with great calm I replied, "How can I know that is supposed to be my name when you always call me 'Debbie'?"

At that point, my mom started laughing and I don't remember what she had been upset about, or if it even mattered at that moment, because to be fair, I had made a valid point.

Perhaps there are other parents who can relate to dealing with a precocious child. As a memory, it's pretty humorous, but at the time I'm sure it must have been exasperating for my mom. It's therefore somewhat comforting to see in today's Gospel lesson from Luke that Mary and Joseph suffered similar and very human struggles raising the child Jesus.

The story of twelve-year-old Jesus being lost and found in Luke's Gospel is one of my favorites because it answers a lot of questions or wonderments about what the Son of God was like between his birth and the start of his public ministry. From the story it looks like this was a time Jesus learned a lot about being human, like all of us

are continually learning. It also seems to be when he learned what it means to be the Love of God incarnate, in human flesh. It's a very incarnational story, which is why it shows up on the Second Sunday in the Christmas Season. Christmas is the twelve days the Church gives us to not only celebrate the birth of Jesus, but to reflect on and dwell in the Mystery of the Incarnation, of the Word made flesh living among us.

Scholars like to remind us this story is also a foreshadowing of what to expect later in the Gospel; of a future time Jesus will go to Jerusalem, have some difficult conversations with religious leaders, and those who love him will suffer great anxiety over losing him for three days, when he will be raised from the dead and found going about his Father's work of bringing new life, resurrection life into this tired old world. Scholars also like to remind us this story reveals that Jesus was raised by religiously devout parents who obediently observed religious rituals and was as religiously obedient himself. Jesus didn't just show precocious intelligence, he showed up for the times of prayer, fasting, and celebration. This is important to remember later, but for now it's important for us to see Jesus learned obedience from his parents.

We read in today's Gospel Mary and Joseph were not just anxious, but relieved and angry when they finally found their lost child and it appeared he had deliberately disobeyed them by staying behind when the rest of his family had packed up and returned home. You don't need much imagination to hear the emotion in Mary's words to Jesus. I imagine she probably sounded a lot like my own mother when she yelled at me.

Renowned Biblical scholar Raymond Brown imagines Mary and Joseph weren't the only ones upset and disappointed that day. He observes Jesus' response to Mary's scolding was a sad one because she and Joseph failed to understand who he really was. Perhaps he's right. Most children go through phases where they feel their parents don't understand them. But I prefer the interpretation of another of my favorite theologians, my mother, who struggled to raise her own precocious children, deals with her precocious grandchild and brings that unique perspective to this scripture passage that Mary didn't disappoint Jesus that day. Instead, she taught him a vital lesson that being the Son of God involves humble obedience instead of "smart aleck" wisecracks.

That Mary speaks on behalf of both her and Joseph is a significant detail because it shows a break from the patriarchal norms of the day. This would be a surprise and points to not just her emotions, but the significance of what is going on. Jesus seemed to take the attitude he didn't do anything wrong, that being God's Son somehow implies he can do no wrong and he decides when he is obedient to his family or to God, or does whatever he wants. Mary's sharp words, which my mom sometimes wonders were accompanied by a vigorous embrace, seems to shake things up, and ultimately points to Jesus being both human and divine, and that combination is a responsibility of obedience, not immature whim fulfillment.

In other words, the child Jesus still needed to learn about discerning and listening to and following the will of God. And who better to teach him than two human beings who both said yes to God when God asked them to be part of the mysterious miracle that is Jesus' birth. That is why we also read in today's Gospel after this incident Jesus returned home with his parents and was obedient and didn't cause them so much anxiety again. And through his obedience grew in wisdom, both in his humanity and divinity.

I believe this is a vital lesson for all of us during these particular times when we continue to face a pandemic that at the moment doesn't seem to be getting any better as daily new cases are on the rise. However, despite data like that, I observe so many people who profess they don't need to obey the rules and mandates like wearing face masks and maintaining six feet social distance in public or keeping celebrations small or abstaining from attending large public gatherings, which all intend to slow the spread of the virus because they are Christians and God will protect them from the virus. Or even worse, some Christians are angered by the regulations and claim such regulations are persecutions against churches and it is therefore an act of defiant courage to refuse to follow them.

Today's Gospel reveals this attitude is not courageous nor is it an expression of faith but is a misguided form of selfishness. As our Presiding Bishop, the Most Rev. Michael Curry reminds us in his sermons and writings, selfishness is the opposite of love. Love, especially the Love of God in Jesus Christ is a love that heals instead of harms, feeds instead of deprives, forgives instead of taking revenge. It's a love for God and our neighbors expressed in what we are willing to sacrifice for each other. That is what obedience to God, what following Jesus looks like. Which means rules, regulations, and mandates intended to care for others are as much a part of being obedient to God as prayer and attending worship services.

Even as an adult, we never see Jesus in any of the Gospels depicted as someone who sees himself as being exempt from following the religious or legal rules. He followed them, and the times it appeared he broke rules like working on the sabbath he didn't do anything to fulfill any self-interest, but to heal someone, to restore them to wholeness and wellness.

I know this pandemic feels like it is going on and on, that even a vaccine isn't making things go back to the way they were before. I know it's exhausting. I know it meant a very different Christmas and New Year's Eve celebrations for many of us. This was the very first Christmas Eve in my life where I didn't attend a church service in person, it was all recorded a head of time. And as grateful as I am for technology, it still felt sad. But the truth is I would have felt much worse if I had broken the rules, held a large in person Christmas Eve service with singing and later learned folks who attended got sick, had to be hospitalized or died.

The truth is, as much as some folks dislike the word obedience, there is value in it. Of course I'm not endorsing blind obedience to an abusive partner, boss, or anything like that. I'm talking about obedience to those who care for us and to God. By now, you all probably know I recently had my left hip replaced. Recovery from such a major operation requires obedience to my surgeon's and physical therapists' rules and guidelines. I have to go to physical therapy twice a week, I have to do daily exercises at home, I have to be careful how I move - I can't bend at a certain angle or stay stationary too long. And I have to rest, which is one of my struggles. These rules aren't meant to oppress me, or punish me. The opposite is true, they are intended to help me heal so I can have a better quality of life than I did with severe osteoarthritis. The same is true for the COVID guidelines; they are intended to keep the virus from spreading uncontrollably and causing harm to individuals, stress to hospitals, and could prevent grieving the death of loved ones. Following both my recovery guidelines and the COVID guidelines also show obedience to God, because they are a form of practicing love for each other, which is another way of loving God.

Following Jesus requires obedience, just as Jesus himself was obedient. It's perhaps comforting that Jesus learned obedience to God isn't a form of oppression or punishment, nor it is a pass to ignore the rules of society, it is another way to show God's love on earth. As followers of Jesus part of our calling is to incarnate Christ to the world, even a world in the midst of a pandemic. This looks like the many creative ways we respond to the challenges of the times, some of which have led to deeper connections to each other, like how this sermon - thanks to being prerecorded and shared via You Tube, is being watched by not only parishioners in

my parish where I serve as rector, but the parish where I grew up and was raised to the priesthood. There are other ways we all can make known to a weary world the hopeful, healing love of God in Christ. As we start a new calendar year and find the challenges of the pandemic are still very much with us, maybe we all can endeavor to let that healing, holy, hopeful love of God shine through all that we do and say, and even in what we are willing to abstain from, and to wait for, so that through our obedience to God, we show others the way to God's Love. That's what this weary world needs more than anything.

Please remember you are deeply loved by God. That I love you. God is right here with us, and together we will make it through to a new and better time.