

Sermon Notes for Sunday, January 9th

The First Sunday After the Epiphany

(using lections for 2 Christmas – The Baptism of Our Lord is transferred to January 16th at Church of Our Saviour this year for pastoral reasons)

Isaiah 60:1-6, Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14, Ephesians 3:1-12, Luke 2:41-52

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Today's Gospel is both remarkable and unremarkable. Remarkable that it is the only story we have in the canonical Bible of Jesus between his infancy and his baptism as an adult in the Jordan.

Unremarkable, that twelve-year-old Jesus, like most people between the ages of 12 and 18, seems puzzled by his parents' inability to understand why he is where he is or doing what he's doing! In this way, I suppose, this story serves us in part as a reminder of Jesus' humanity. Like us, he experiences some of the familial trials of growing up, of exploring and finding out who he is, of plumbing the depths of his identity to start sorting out the meaning of his heritage.

Twelve in Jesus' society is an age to begin reaching for adulthood, a reckoning of deeper identity than just the son of Mary and Joseph of Nazareth. More than that, Jesus is starting to perceive his call in a more adult way – a recognition that he belongs to something and Someone greater than his birth family, an understanding that he is part of something larger than a household or the trade of a carpenter.

In the season of The Epiphany, we as a community of faith are wrestling with and rejoicing with the discovery of identity – the identity of Christ Jesus, revealed in the coming of a star, the arrival of light, the revelation of angels and wise men and shepherds. And therefore, by extension, we are discovering our own identity as followers of Christ, of learning what it means to be heirs of the kingdom, the reign that Christ brings that upsets all other reigns and kingdoms and powers and principalities of the world.

We hear this Gospel story today against the backdrop of national tragedy – the shooting of a congressional representative, a federal judge, of citizens out to learn more about their government or simply to buy groceries to feed their families, of a nine-year-old girl who tragically will not in this life experience the self-discoveries of turning twelve. We recoil at this blight on our open society, and agree wholeheartedly with the universal condemnation of it as we pray for the survivors and the families and friends of all the victims.

But it is not enough, it seems to me, to simply call this act “senseless,” as one prominent politician did yesterday, and then move on with life as usual. The shooting yesterday embodies – it incarnates, if you will – the division, distortion, and demonization that has come to dominate and dehumanize our national conversations over the past few years. We have all, in this way, become both victims and perpetrators of what Bill Bishop has called “The Big Sort” – blue states vs. red states, conservatives vs. liberals, tea partiers vs. money-grubbing bureaucrats, libertarians vs. socialists. We have forgotten what it means to be truly accountable and honest with one another, to listen to more than sound bites before

forming judgments of one another and people who have given their lives in the hope of a better future for generations to come.

Ours has been a nation built on relationships broken out of fear for far too long. We have built our identities too much around what we fear and around those things we are against. We fear one another to the point of forgetting that we belong to one another. We blame our challenges on the other, whether at home or abroad. We dismiss one another as anti-intellectual philistines or cerebral wonks. We lash out at perspectives we don't understand, rather than listen more attentively – to seek, as the hymn attributed to Francis says, to understand more than to be understood.

It's because we are afraid. Whatever madness possessed the shooter yesterday, there seems little doubt that the bizarre and horrific act was one somehow rooted in fear. All evil acts are ultimately.

Today's Gospel reading could, I suppose, have ended with Jesus staying in Jerusalem at his Father's House. He could have rejected his parents outright for being Nazareth peasants (they were), ignorant of the greater plan that lay before him. The Holy Family itself, I suppose, could have been divided like our national family between those who "get it" and those who don't. Instead of the Holy Family, we might have called it the Holy Big Sort. But then the meaning of Epiphany would have been completely lost. For Emmanuel, "God with us," also means the light of the divine life in the midst of the hardships of humanity growing up both individually and corporately, both in our own identities, and in the relational, sometimes conflicted they may be, identities that define our lives. And if we lose that, Jesus becomes just another extremist who, perhaps when he reaches adulthood, will end up inspiring violence rather than peace, division rather than reconciliation, fear rather than courage, and bitter hatred rather than compassion. In short, to lose Epiphany is to watch the Gospel die, in a metaphor of bitter irony, on the vine.

Jesus' response, as hard as it must have been, given the vexation of his parents and his bewilderment at their lack of understanding, is to go home with them and cultivate a relationship for the time they are given together. To remain with them, probably to learn the trade of carpentry from his father, to hang around the household with his mother, to engage in the hard work of growing up in relationship – even with people who may never fully understand him. What Luke tells us is this: that from this experience Jesus acquires wisdom. His example today shows us and our fellow citizens and leaders a different path than the one we have undertaken in recent years: to attend to the hard work of relationship in the family we have received – and that most of all includes our neighbors both local and national who may differ from us considerably.

As Christians, it strikes me that the best legacy and the greatest gift we can offer in memory of the victims of the shooting in Arizona is to set aside our fears, and follow Jesus' Epiphany example of attention to authentic, deep relationship built on understanding – and thereby, to truly grow in wisdom that will nurture the lives of those who are with us now, and all who come after us in a fragile world.