

First Presbyterian Church Wausau, WI
The Great A-ha – January 3, 2016
Luke 2:40-52
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Adolescence is a time of discovery. Changes in our brain allow us to think more abstractly. Our ability to reason is awakened and we can begin to think hypothetically. Our base of knowledge of the world around us greatly expands. We begin to develop wisdom and insight as we learn to make sense of our experiences. Hormones begin to trigger physical development and our bodies grow and change. And our interpersonal relationships take on new dynamics as the egocentrism of childhood morphs and expands to include knowledge and understanding of “the other.” As we think about our relationships to others, questions about our own identity begin to surface. It’s a time when we begin to explore our own independence.

As we look back on that time in our own lives or consider the lives of our children and grandchildren, we recall that every day of adolescence is an adventure. Those of you with younger kids – enjoy it while it lasts! Adolescence is a time in our lives that we look back upon and wonder how we ever survived it. And parents with tweens and young teens wonder if they’ll ever make it through their own child’s development. And anytime I think about middle school teachers, I shake my head in wonder and in deep awe, knowing that I could never do that – could never surround myself with 30 or so young adolescents every single day.

Twelve-year-old Jesus accompanied his parents to Jerusalem for the Passover Celebration. In the Jewish tradition, a boy his age was right at the cusp between childhood and adulthood. Jewish law required that all men make pilgrimages to Jerusalem at the time of major festivals, especially Passover. It wasn’t required for women or children, but often they came anyway. It was not uncommon for groups to travel together. From Nazareth, it would probably take about 4 days to reach the city on foot. Not quite the spring break trip that we might imagine, but a festival in the big city was certainly an exciting experience for young people.

Luke is the only gospel writer that includes this particular story from the life of Jesus. And as we read it, it is surprisingly realistic. I suppose in many ways the relationship between parents and emerging adolescents is timeless.

The family had traveled to Jerusalem with other pilgrims from Nazareth. As they begin their journey homeward, they are not concerned about the whereabouts of the boy Jesus. Most likely he is walking with his peer group and rehashing their experiences with one another.

It’s not until the pilgrims stop for the night that Joseph and Mary realize that Jesus is not with the travelers. The text is amazingly thin in its details, but I can imagine the frantic stress that couple must be under – searching among the group, questioning the boy’s friends, pleading with everyone to remember when last they saw him. Perhaps one of the biggest fears of any parent is losing track of a child. Did he get lost along the road? Perhaps wandering away from the group? Injuring himself somehow or kidnapped by brigands? Getting into trouble with the city boys? Who knows what? Any

number of painful scenarios must have gone through their minds as they retraced their steps all the way back to Jerusalem.

Finally after three long days of searching, they discovered Jesus in the Temple. He was sitting with the teachers of the law, the rabbis. He was so engrossed in this endeavor that he seemed surprised at his parent's level of anxiety, even though three days he passed. His mother began speaking, and I have to smile at how calm the dialogue is as recorded by Luke – yet even so, there is no doubt of the mixture of anger and relief in her voice – a true to life response. She said, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you with great anxiety!"

This interchange of dialogue is the climax of the story. This is what Luke wants us to pay attention to. Jesus responded to them, "Why were you looking for me?" He really doesn't get it. He doesn't understand why on earth they would or should be upset with him. He's not some naughty child caught with his hand in the cookie jar. And listen carefully to what he says next, "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" Now he's the one to be astonished. For him, to be in the Temple among the teachers of the law was the most natural thing for him to do. So natural, he assumes that should be apparent to everyone. He even asks the question as if expecting them to agree – Did you not know? How could you not know?

It wasn't just that he wanted to be there. He HAD to be there. Listen again to what he said, "I MUST be in my Father's house." He was compelled to be there. He was drawn there. He innately knew that that was his place. And when he said "Father" he wasn't talking about Joseph.

And so the point of this passage, the reason that Luke included it in his gospel, is to give us a glimpse of the identity of Jesus. He's 12 years old here. He's not a grown man. He's an adolescent who is coming to understand who he is. He is figuring out his identity. As any adolescent would. For him, this is that great "A-ha! Moment." That experience of putting pieces together and beginning to see how things are taking shape in his life.

This fits in quite well with today being the first day of Epiphany. What is an epiphany? I talked about this in my Beam article. According to the Merriam Webster online dictionary, an epiphany is "a usually sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something (2) an intuitive grasp of reality through something (as an event) usually simple and striking (3) an illuminating discovery, realization, or disclosure; a revealing scene or moment."

Luke uses this scene in Jesus' life to reveal to us information about his identity. Up until this point in Luke's gospel, everyone else has been making assertions about the identity of Jesus – the Angel Gabriel, the old priest Zechariah at the Temple, Mary when she went to visit Elizabeth, the shepherds recounting what the angel told them, and then the two people at the Temple Simeon and Anna. Who Jesus is and what he will do have been announced by all these other agents. And now, as Jesus makes the transition from boyhood to manhood, he is discovering for himself who he is. And not surprising, this self revelation, comes in the Temple.

The Temple is an important part of the Jewish faith – it is the center of the cultic tradition, it is the dwelling place of God. So Jesus, having come to Jerusalem with his family to celebrate the Passover, feels a strong pull to the Temple. He is drawn there. He **must** be there; it is necessary.

Now this should not be confused with destiny or fate. He is not forced there, or coerced to be there. This is where he feels most alive. This is where he discovers his identity. Who he is more than just following some script like an actor on stage. He is responding to an internal drive, the divine imperative that has been awakened within him as he growing into adulthood.

Let's look back at the scripture to verse 47. It reads, "And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers." Jesus was sitting among the teachers. He was learning from them, and asking them questions. They were astonished by him. And I don't think it's because he knew all the answers and had some encyclopedic understanding of the Jewish law that he was flaunting like some obnoxious know-it-all child.

Think about it. He'd been there for at least three days. He wanted to learn from these rabbis. He was like a sponge trying to soak up as much as he could from these teachers. By this point he was comfortable with them and they with him. They were probably enjoying having such an exceptional pupil. And obviously he was skilled and brilliant. He was the kind of student that only came around once in lifetime, if even then.

I think there's a subtle difference between finding one's identity and discovering one's identity. Finding seems to connote something that is external. "I've lost my keys – or my 12 year old son – and I need to go find them." I need to look outward, outside of myself. I need to search "out there." Discovering has a more internal feel to it.

During adolescence and young adulthood, we learn about ourselves. We discover our interests, our abilities, our talents, our strengths and weaknesses, our temperament, our learning style. During childhood many kids have a dream of being a famous athlete. They join teams, they practice, they condition, they get the fancy shoes and uniforms – they do all the external elements to help them achieve their dream. But if they don't have the innate talent and abilities – the internal elements – they probably will be quite frustrated.

Now there are times when the inner drive can exceed physical limitations. Sometimes the pull to claim your identity can overcome disabilities. I know of a man who early in his life had a stuttering problem. He was college band director but felt called to do more. He overcame his speech impediment, and now he is a well-respected motivational speaker. Another more extreme example comes to mind. Helen Keller was born deaf and blind, yet her teacher and mentor opened the world to her and helped her discover who she could be.

At this time of year, many of us have probably thought about resolutions to make changes in our lives in the New Year. The top two seem to be dieting and gym memberships. Many folks have jumped on the "new you in the new year" bandwagon. The problem is, it's an externally motivated change. Many people do it, because it's the thing to do. It may be necessary, but the saying goes,

“old habits die hard.” Willpower alone can’t do it. Noone is that strong. Anyone who has been successful in changing their health habits will probably say, “it was a lifestyle choice.”

I think that means, they had to choose that way of life as part of their identity. They discovered it within themselves and claimed it. Maybe it’s simply the difference between saying “I am a healthy person” versus “I’m going lose this weight if it kills me.”

Jesus, as an adolescent boy, began to discover who he was. His gifts and abilities, his inner motivation, his temperament and the divine imperative that he felt pushing him forward – all those qualities worked together into forming him into the Messiah that he innately was.

So what does this mean for us? How can we apply this information to our lives? Well I think, living out our identity as Christians is a similar exercise. Scripture tells us that we were each created in God’s own image and through Christ we have been adopted into the family of God. We are God’s precious and beloved children. This is our identity, who we are. Throughout his ministry, Jesus gave us numerous examples of what that means, what that looks like. Things like, if you would be my disciple, deny yourself, take up your cross daily, and follow me. Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. Be righteous, as your Father in heaven is righteous.

Depending upon where we are in our faith journey, we are discovering what that means for us. We are trying to figure out how to truly live that identity. Some of us may need rules to follow. A guidebook or manual of what the Christian life looks like until it becomes more natural – fortunately we have the Bible to help us learn and point us in the right direction. Others of us may have already internalized the Christian worldview and are working to incorporate it into all aspects of our lives. The rest of us are somewhere along the continuum of faith development.

When we claim Christian as our identity, it is a recognizing, a discovering of what God has done for us. It is the receiving of the gifts of grace and forgiveness and unconditional love, through no merit of our own. But just like in any endeavor, in order to grow and mature, we must practice and develop our gifts. A concert pianist doesn’t start out by playing Chopin as a toddler. Learning the notes and understanding the musicality takes practice, lots and lots of practice. And repetition. Until finally, muscle memory kicks in, and the playing seems effortless.

Habits form and develop over time through intentional practice. Our journey of faith, our discovering of what it means to claim the identity of “Christian” will take our whole lives. The trick is to keep moving forward, to grow and mature in our faith. May we each claim and live out our identity as the children, the beloved sons and daughters, of God.