

“Christian Spiritual Formation in the Church and Classroom”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, September 7, 2014
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Holy Scriptures: Luke 2: 41-52

Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival.

When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day’s journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him.

After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.

When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.”

He said to them, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”

But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

Today's message draws deeply from the well of Suzanne Johnson's teaching in her seminal book, Christian Spiritual Formation in the Church and Classroom. Enjoy!

Care of Souls

As much as the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and John have to offer

about the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth,
only the Gospel According to Luke
includes a story from Jesus' childhood.

The story serves as a graceful transition
from his birth narratives to his adult ministry.

We are flies on the wall of the temple,
privileged to overhear

his questioning of the Elders in the Sanctuary,
and to witness his exchange with Mary and Joseph,
who are all at once

grateful-to-have-found-Jesus-yet-frustrated-
that-he'd-stayed-behind.

We can well imagine that they were torn,
torn between wanting to hug Jesus and take him to
the woodshed.

Yet Jesus spoke clearly with them and he is clear with us:

“Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”

The Holy Bible informs us that

“Jesus increased in wisdom and in years,
and in divine and human favor.”

What we are blessed with is a Christological point:

Jesus’ wisdom and his sonship
are inextricably linked with his personal
relationship with God.

He encounters God

in the context of religious education and spiritual
formation

in the temple.

His identity and his spirituality are one.

His learning and teaching, his receiving and preaching are
linked.

His vocation and mission,

his healing the wounded and being a wounded healer
are bound together, woven with grace into a
tapestry of love.

“One of the developmental tasks of childhood, teenage, and
young adulthood

is discovering and affirming one’s identity.

What defines one’s identity

– family ties, religious experience, a sense of vocation,
a personal creed, or one’s dreams and ideals?

Jesus found his identity by affirming his relationship with
God.” [1]

In time, with experience, with patience and perseverance,

Jesus of Nazareth named and claimed the mantle of
Jesus the Christ,

and in doing so he showed us the way
to affirm our relationship with God.

“Did we not know that we must be in our Creator’s house?”

With Jesus,

we increase in wisdom and in years,
and in divine and human favor.

Jesus Christ cares for our souls,

and shows us how to care for one another’s as well.

Care of Souls

A Christian educator tells of giving adult instruction via the mail to two different adults.

One man began the correspondence membership class

but had to stop when his company moved him to the Middle East.

The other was a “guest” of the Idaho State Penitentiary.

When he completed the requirements for church membership,

the teacher explained to the congregation

that he could not come to church because he was a “shut-in.” [2]

When we back up to our assumptions from which to find a starting point,

let us agree that “the intent of Christian education is to form Christians.

We are not forming people who are religious in general

(in fact, there is no such thing).

This is not to deny the truthfulness of other religious narratives;

[this is] to reaffirm that we reach the universal truth

through our own particular existence.” [3]

We make the conscious choice to reach for the truth
in and through the love of God in Jesus Christ.
We have decided to accept the call from God to form
disciples of Jesus Christ.
The call and need for the formation of Christians
is as great today as ever before.
We live in an age of a great awakening of spirituality.

“Membership in mainline churches in the United States
has been on steady, precipitous decline for several
decades.
The question pressing the church
is not so much whether our children will have
spirituality
but whether Christianity will have our
children.”

Christianity has no grandchildren.
We do not inherit our faith or our salvation through anyone
else.
Each one of us must make the personal choice
to love the Lord our God
with all our heart, and mind, and strength, and
soul.
Even so, this does not absolve us of our joy and responsibility
to pass it on.
We who are so blessed to connect with Christ and Christ’s
people
are empowered to share the Good News.
Receiving the love of God
as well as being and sharing the Good News
are equal parts of the package deal of Christian
spirituality.

Care of Souls

The word spiritual is cluttered with multiple and hazy definitions.

You have observed as well as I that we are in a time and place where new-age spirituality, esoteric cults, and spiritual psychologies dominate the landscape.

Just in case you should require hard evidence and definitive confirmation,

go visit a local bookstore

or peruse the internet for books and blogs on spirituality.

Chances are you will find what we are discussing on a bookshelf labeled Self-Help.

Did you hear of the gentleman who could not find the Self-Help section in a bookstore? He eventually left unfulfilled because he refused to ask for directions.

We yearn for a sacred connection,

for affirming relationships with God and one another and our Self.

We yearn, yet we are torn and tossed about where and to whom to turn.

We are inundated with spiritual tomes

that are based on the secular and the spectacular and contemporary culture,

making it quite a challenge for the seeker

to determine the authentic from the

bogus,

the theological from the secular,

the Biblical from the

whimsical.

“Too much contemporary spirituality has lost its historical moorings.

Modern Christians are largely content
to swim in the warm stream of the immediate.

Recasting an Old Testament image,
Gustavo Gutierrez reminds us that spirituality in the
life of the church

can continue to exist
only when it sends us back to our
decisive sources.

We must drink from our own
wells (Proverbs 5: 15).

[Emory University and Decatur's own] Don Saliers reminds
us, in this respect,

that Christian worship and spirituality
must center in the common memory
of those who gather around the
[baptismal pool],
the [Holy Bible] and the [Lord's
Table].

Christians today, to a great extent,
have taken on the name "Christian"
without appropriating the Story, the living
memory,
that determines the meaning of the
name they bear!

Hence, they cannot see their lives in continuity
with the redemptive history into which they have been
adopted,

namely, the whole biblical story of God's work "for
us"

through Israel and the life, death, and
resurrection of Jesus Christ."[\[4\]](#)

Care of Souls

When the boy Jesus hungered for a reminder, an affirmation,
a deepening of his spirituality, he went to the Temple.
Even though it meant disobeying his earthly family,
he knew he must be in his Creator's house.
We, too, are invited and inspired to deepen our spirituality
through Bible study and prayer,
through questioning and listening,
through examining the Word
and experiencing the Word as it
examines us.

Jesus took full advantage of his chance, his shot, his
opportunity to study
when it presented itself.

Are you?

If so, are you wiser and growing in divine and human favor?

If not, what do you think might happen if you did?

When Pastor Bill Goodin was teaching a Confirmation Class,
he invited the young people to discuss
how the world would have been different
had Adam and Eve not sinned in the
Garden of Eden.

The boys were "getting a handle" on the idea
that Adam and Eve and all their relations
would still be alive today.

Two girls had their heads together during the discussion and
seemed troubled.

Finally one said, "*We'd all be naked!*"

The other said, with equal dismay, "*There would be no
shopping malls!*"

Pastor Goodin said, "*I love confirmation class.*"

*They always give me new
perspectives."* [5]

New perspectives like the child who said he could not complete his religious homework

because the zipper on his bible was stuck.

Why didn't I ever think of that when I was in confirmation class? [6]

On another occasion Pastor Goodin was teaching confirmation to a deaf class.

By using American Sign Language,

he was sharing the concept of God as our Heavenly Father.

One student became almost violent in opposition to the lesson.

He was furious that I would try to teach him such a lousy idea!

"But I was the teacher," said Goodin, *"and I had a lesson plan."*

God was his Father in Heaven, and he had better get used to the idea."

Later, the supervising pastor helped Bill Goodin process the experience.

He asked, *"Did you ever ask him about his father?"*

State law required deaf students to be sent home on weekends.

This boy's father was the man who came home drunk on Friday nights

and beat him because he was deaf.

In this case, God was not like his father.

God was like his house parents at school.

The boy forgave Pastor Goodin for confusing his faith in God.

The pastor learned to listen. [7]

Care of Souls

Christians! Good people of faith, hope and love!
Today, to a great extent,
 we take on the name “Christian”
 because we are appropriating the Story, the
living memory,
 that determines the meaning of the
name we bear!

May our Christianity be formed and shaped in the church
and in the classroom,
 in the family, in the community, in the workplace
 and wherever/however we invest our energy.

Let’s name it, claim it, and then aim it.

We name our spirituality Christian,
 as one that is Christ-Centered,
 as an active engagement that grows out of our
affirmation
 that we have a relationship with God.

We claim our Christian spirituality
 to be the telling and living out of our Story,
 for we are blessed to be the continuation of
God’s Story.

We aim our Christian spirituality
 toward forming and growing Disciples of Jesus Christ,
 humbly starting with our own sense of Self
 yet never content to stop there.

Jesus Christ, who cares for our souls,
 has shown us how to care for one another as well.
*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy
Spirit. Amen!*

Invitation to Communion

Jesus celebrated our fertile minds. Jesus asked, “What do you think of the Messiah?” (Matthew 22: 42) Good question. What do you think?

The Living Christ does not ask us to check at the door our brains, our capacity to reason, or our ability to think and question, to wonder and challenge.

Come to the Lord’s Table with all your questions, ideas and dreams. Rather than letting those thoughts keep you at a distance, or feel removed from the holy, allow your fertile mind to be engaged with the mind of Christ.

[1] The New Interpreter’s Bible. Volume IX. Luke, John. Abingdon Press. 1995. Page 78.

[2] William Goodin, God Laughs, Too. CSS Publishing Co. 1990. Page 66.

[3] Suzanne Johnson, Christian Spiritual Formation in the Church and Classroom. Abingdon Press. 1989. Page 161.

[4] Johnson, Page 13.

[5] Goodin, Page 19.

[6] Ibid, P. 17.

[7] Ibid. P. 17.