

Liturgical Day: The First Sunday after Christmas
Date: December 31, 2006
Sermon Title: Great Question!

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our Catechism students are currently on Christmas break. A number of them will be headed to Rainbow Trail Lutheran Camp with me this weekend, and then next week some of them will be back to their studies after a couple of weeks off. I've missed them, and look forward to getting together with them soon.

I was thinking of them this week, as I studied today's Gospel lesson. In Catechism, we have a number of required components in the program, and one of those requirements is that fifteen times each year, they fill out one of these Sunday Worship Reflection Sheets (or as they call them: "The Yellow Sheet"). It is a tool that helps some of them to pay closer attention to what we do at worship – and it gives me a chance to observe what they are getting out of our times together on Sunday mornings.

At the very bottom of the sheet is a box where I invite them to write down any questions they have for the Pastor. Sometimes those questions arise out of what I say during a sermon. Sometimes they are based on one of the lessons of the day, or something in our liturgy. Occasionally I'll get questions that are entirely unrelated to that day's worship – something that has been on their minds.

I love those questions, because I am convinced that opening up the possibility for them to ask their deepest questions is one of the most significant ways that we help them grow. I can lecture to them all night long, and when I do, I focus on what is most important to me. I enjoy that, of course, and it helps me to work through and better understand what I believe. But it is when we start working with their questions, that we start helping them develop their own faith – a faith that they can relate to, and that has meaning for them. So questions are a very important part of our Catechism ministries, and a very important part of how we work with young people here at Saint Peter.

Every time we gather as a group, we have a tradition. Early on in the evening, I read one of the questions I have received recently. I congratulate that student for asking such a good question. And I reward them with some sort of a prize. It is a way to encourage them to keep asking questions; a way to affirm that working on questions together is an important piece of what it means to be faithful. The Christian faith is not one that is reluctant to wrestle with difficult questions, and we believe that by dealing with these questions, God helps us to grow in faith.

I know that some people grew up in a faith environment where questions weren't allowed. I've heard stories about people who were advised early on to keep their questions to themselves. Sometimes that advice came from a church that was very specific about what it believed, and unwilling to consider any other point of view. Sometimes that advice came from church leaders who weren't confident enough to deal with hard questions, and so they chose to simply ignore them. Sometimes that advice

FIRST LESSON
1ST SAMUEL 2:18-20, 26

PSALM
PSALM 148

SECOND LESSON
COLOSSIANS 3:12-17

GOSPEL LESSON
ST. LUKE 2:41-52

PRAYER OF THE DAY
ALMIGHTY GOD, YOU HAVE MADE YOURSELF KNOWN IN YOUR SON, JESUS, REDEEMER OF THE WORLD. WE PRAY THAT HIS BIRTH AS A HUMAN CHILD WILL SET US FREE FROM THE OLD SLAVERY OF OUR SIN; THROUGH JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD, WHO LIVES AND REIGNS WITH YOU AND THE HOLY SPIRIT, ONE GOD, NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.


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Forms Completed so Far This Year _____ (of 15, Total)	Forms That Should Have Been Completed by This Date _____
Baptismal Date: _____	Your Name: _____
Today's Date: _____	The Name of the Sunday (or Festival Day): _____
Today's Worship Service:	
Catechism "A Journey in Faith"	The thing I liked most about today: _____
Sunday Worship Reflection Sheet	The thing I disliked most about today: _____
Today's Bible Lesson:	
On what lesson was Pastor's sermon based? _____	Check (2) one: <input type="checkbox"/> Old Testament <input type="checkbox"/> New Testament <input type="checkbox"/> Gospel
Today's Sermon (use the back of this sheet if necessary):	
In your own words, summarize the reading that Pastor used for the sermon: _____	
Summarize the main point of the sermon (remember: not the children's message, but the sermon): _____	
Questions for the Pastor (use the back of this sheet if necessary):	
What question do you have for the Pastor about today's worship service? _____	

came from parents who felt incapable of helping their children find credible answers to their questions. But in every case, that was bad advice. We learn so much, and we grow so much, from pursuing answers to our own questions, that it is unwise for anyone to try and suppress the questions of young people, or of anyone else for that matter.

That may seem like a modern way of thinking. But in fact, it is based on very ancient practice. There are few humans who have been more widely known, or influenced more people, than Jesus of Nazareth. As the poet put it, nobody has changed this world as much as that one solitary life. But you can scour Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and even the letters of Paul, and you find only one story about the personal life of our Lord during the first thirty-something years of his life.

That story, of course, is our Gospel lesson today. It's a familiar story. What interests me in the story this morning, is the scene where Mary and Joseph finally discover Jesus in the Temple. St. Luke describes it this way.

*After three days they found him in the temple,
sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.*

When Mary and Joseph returned to Jerusalem, they finally found Jesus sitting with the teachers, studying with them and asking them questions. He wasn't memorizing scripture. He wasn't learning rules and regulations. He wasn't standing around, listening to clever lectures. He was asking questions — inviting the teachers in the Temple to help him resolve difficulties he had, and understand the more complex issues involved in being a faithful person.

If we are honest, we have to admit that there are any number of difficult questions that come with our faith, and with the Biblical story that informs what we believe.

- Why do chapters one and two of Genesis disagree with one another?
- Did Jonah really get swallowed by a fish?
- Would a loving and gracious God delight in drowning Pharaoh's army in the Reed Sea?
- Should the Hebrew word *almah* (young woman) or the Greek word *gunaikos* (virgin) be used to describe Jesus' mother?

In some people's minds, these kinds of questions threaten the tenets of the faith, and cast suspicion on everything that we profess to be true. So they protected their faith from these kinds of questions, perhaps fearing that it would be destroyed.

All too often, that's been the attitude of the church:

- The priest Abiathar was thrown out of Israel after questioning King Solomon about the death of his brother.
- The astronomer Copernicus was put to death for questioning whether or not the sun actually revolved around the earth.
- The monk Martin Luther was excommunicated for encouraging people to question the authority of the Roman church.

God's people have displayed a powerful fear of those who ask troubling questions...

But in today's Gospel, the picture of Jesus in the temple teaches us quite the opposite. This kind of hard questioning actually deepens faith. Growth in faith comes from asking, and struggling to answer the difficult questions. Jesus asked questions — and remember what happened to him:

[He] increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

The Gospel writer leaves no doubt that the inquisitiveness observed in the young Jesus was part of what helped him to grow in wisdom. By asking the teachers to explain themselves, he began to understand for himself, and make his faith his own.

As was true for Jesus, asking questions can stretch our understanding of God and the Gospel. Questioning makes our beliefs our own, because we've understood them, and come to cherish them. Everybody knows that it is possible to accept a belief system as it is, and some do that. But to receive that heritage of faith in love, and then to test it and question it and wrestle with it is to make it our own. Although

the process can be difficult, it is one of the few ways to end up with a faith that is living, and vibrant, and vital to our day-to-day living.

This morning, throughout the nation, college students are home from school — many of them attending worship with their families. They've returned, most of them, from ten weeks or so of asking tough questions, strengthening their minds, and challenging one another to grow in learning. I find myself wondering what kind of atmosphere they will find in their home churches. Will they be in places that fear questions, and suppress anything that challenges them or makes them feel uncomfortable? Or will they be places that welcome their questions, and use them to probe the depths of the faith?

May God grant that, at least in this place, we will be bold enough and wise enough to allow our faith to be questioned, to struggle together to understand the deeper issues of our faith, and to encourage one another to be open to the change and growth that can come from such a process. If we can do that, then we will have learned much from this morning's story of Jesus in the temple. And we can be confident that if we are brave enough to struggle with the important questions, with the help of the Holy Spirit, it will be said of us as well:

[They] increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

Let me leave with you with these two questions:

QUESTION OF THE DAY:

What questions do you have about the faith we share? And how can wrestling with those questions help you to a deeper and more powerful faith?

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (December 31, 2006)

Gospel Lesson (English): ⁱ

⁴¹ Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. ⁴² And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. ⁴³ When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. ⁴⁴ 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. ⁴⁵ When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. ⁴⁶ After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷ And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸ 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." ⁴⁹ He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" ⁵⁰ But they did not understand what he said to them. ⁵¹ Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. ⁵² And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor. ⁱⁱ

ⁱ Link to: http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/calendar_for_2001.html for a listing of Bible lessons for the coming weeks.

ⁱⁱ St. Luke 2:41-52, New Revised Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America)

Gospel Lesson (Greek):

⁴¹Καὶ ἐπορεύοντο οἱ γονεῖς αὐτοῦ κατα ἔτος εἰς Ἱερουσαλήμ τῆ ἑορτῆ τοῦ πάσχα. ⁴²Καὶ ὅτε ἐγένετο ἐτῶν δώδεκα, ἀναβαινόντων αὐτῶν κατὰ τὸ ἔθος τῆς ἑορτῆς ⁴³καὶ τελειωσάντων τὰς ἡμέρας, ἐν τῷ ὑποστρέφειν αὐτοὺς ὑπέμεινεν Ἰησοῦς ὁ παῖς ἐν Ἱερουσαλήμ, καὶ οὐκ ἔγνωσαν οἱ γονεῖς αὐτοῦ. ⁴⁴νομίσαντες δὲ αὐτὸν εἶναι ἐν τῇ συνοδίᾳ ἦλθον ἡμέρας ὁδὸν καὶ ἀνεζήτουν αὐτὸν ἐν τοῖς συγγενεῦσιν καὶ τοῖς γνωστοῖς, ⁴⁵καὶ μὴ εὐρόντες ὑπέστρεψαν εἰς Ἱερουσαλήμ ἀναζητούντες αὐτόν. ⁴⁶καὶ ἐγένετο μετὰ ἡμέρας τρεῖς εὗρον αὐτὸν ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ καθεζόμενον ἐν μέσῳ τῶν διδασκάλων καὶ ἀκούοντα αὐτῶν καὶ ἐπερωτῶντα αὐτούς. ⁴⁷ἐξίσταντο δὲ πάντες οἱ ἀκούοντες αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ τῇ συνέσει καὶ ταῖς ἀποκρίσεσιν αὐτοῦ. ⁴⁸καὶ ἰδόντες αὐτὸν ἐξεπλάγησαν, καὶ εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτὸν ἡ μήτηρ αὐτοῦ τέκνον, τί ἐποίησας ἡμῖν οὕτως; ἰδοὺ ὁ πατήρ σου καγὼ ὀδυνώμενοι ἐζητοῦμεν σε. ⁴⁹καὶ εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτούς· τί ὅτι ἐζητεῖτε με; οὐκ ᾔδειτε ὅτι ἐν τοῖς τοῦ πατρὸς μου δεῖ εἶναι με; ⁵⁰καὶ αὐτοὶ οὐ συνήκαν τὸ ῥῆμα ὃ ἐλάλησεν αὐτοῖς. ⁵¹καὶ κατέβη μετὰ αὐτῶν καὶ ἦλθεν εἰς Ναζαρεθ καὶ ἦν ὑποτασσόμενος αὐτοῖς. καὶ ἡ μήτηρ αὐτοῦ διετήρει πάντα τὰ ῥήματα ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτῆς. ⁵²Καὶ Ἰησοῦς προέκοπεν [ἐν τῇ] σοφίᾳ καὶ ἡλικίᾳ καὶ χάριτι παρὰ θεῷ καὶ ἀνθρώποις. ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱⁱⁱ St. Luke 2:41-52, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart)