

Styles of Christ
1st Sunday of Christmastide
December 30, 2018
Trinity Bixby
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[Luke 2:41-51](#)
[Colossians 3:12-17](#)

It's hard to imagine a less traditionally Christmas-y story than our Gospel story today. In it, Jesus is not wee babe in a manger – but a twelve-year-old. We're long past the early days of Jesus' life – the Magi, the flight to Egypt – and are solidly the one text we have of Jesus' childhood. Jesus has grown up in the blink of an eye – an altogether too common occurrence that I hear regularly from those with children: “They grew up so quickly! I try to hold on to every day, but they all slip by.”

I think that's a big part of why we have this story preserved – it's a chance for us to see that Jesus was “not just like us, but was us.” He's lived through a full human life, including the rough bits that happen with a bit of misunderstandings – and yes, a bit of snark too. After all, when Mary chides him, saying, “Child, why have you treated us like this? Listen! Your father and I have been worried. We've been looking for you!” we get it. We've been there – either as the kid being scolded, or as the parent doing the scolding. Or both. Sometimes the other way around, too.

Jesus' response, the first thing he says in the Gospel, is a question that ought to drive us: “Why were you looking for me?” Why were Mary and Joseph looking for Jesus? Did they not notice him left behind in Jerusalem for a full day of travel? Why would they look for Jesus? Did they want something from him? Did they feel their hearts fill with anxiety and fear over what could happen to their child if they didn't find him?

Why do you look for Jesus? Do you want Jesus to follow YOUR lead? Are you surprised when you make a beautiful place for Jesus to show up, and then get annoyed when the one who was born in a manger chooses to sleep rough? Or do you make a big show of looking for Jesus, completely ignoring the knocking coming from

your heart. Or the light of Jesus in your neighbor's eye.

But “Why were you looking for me?” isn't the whole of what Jesus says. He continues with an all-too-smug, “Didn't you know that I had to be doing the things of my Father?” It's probably a good thing that we're told that Mary and Joseph didn't understand him. If they had, I can only imagine a stricken, pained look on their faces as they realize that Jesus isn't talking about following in Joseph's line of work – but following in God's.

Now to be fair, the Greek of Luke's Gospel leaves us with a bit of a mystery in this verse. When read literally, you may recall, that there is a blank in the line: “Didn't you know that in the [blank] of my father I need to be?” It's not that a word was left out, but that Greek allows the word to be left out if it would be completely understood. The early translation of this text into Syriac put it, “Didn't you know that I need to be in my father's house?” – and so many English translations follow suit. But many early commentaries and translations render it instead as “Didn't you know that I would be about the business/things/stuff of my Father?” Both are perfectly acceptable, though I'm going to be using the “about the things of my Father” version today.

In any case, this story shows us Jesus doing the work of God, claiming his identity as God's son. He's taking up the mantle of the messiah, it would seem, for the first time. I love this detail, too – it's in our tween and teen years that we start to discover and live into our adult selves for the first time. Jesus' parents are starting to see him claiming an identity apart from them, just like parents today see their kids start to claim new things, whether it's new music choices, groups of friends very different from before, or even the independence of sleep-overs and time at camp. Jesus claims his identity and sticks with it – he knows who he is, and it takes time to show that fully to his parents. In a way, Jesus is showing the style of Christ for the first time, clothing himself in wisdom and love by sitting among the teachers, asking probing questions, and answering with authority.

This “style of Christ” is something that Paul picks up on, too. In his letter to the church at Kolossai, he insists that we must “clothe ourselves” with the things of

Christ. Tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience. Forgiveness. Peace. Wisdom, song, and gratitude. And, of course, agape-love. You see, Paul is imploring us to find our identity in Christ. To wear the style of Christ not just as a fashion, to fit in, but because as Christians we should be “representatives of the Lord Jesus.” Just as Jesus took on the mantle of Christ, the anointed of God, we too should take on the mantle of Jesus. Paul tells us that this is something we “must” do – but then goes on to say that we ought to do it because we are thankful to God.

I tend to think that the style of Christ looks a bit different on different people, just like we all have clothing that we like and prefer to wear. But just because it looks different, or different parts are emphasized, it doesn't mean we aren't together in Christ. Maybe you have a heart for mercy, helping out before being asked. Maybe he has a heart for patience, knowing that good things often happen when you can wait for the right time. Maybe she has wisdom beyond her years, teaching and advising people in God's way. This isn't to say that you have a heart only for one of these styles – you should mix and match as best you can! Yet, the one thing that binds all of these styles together is the Agape-love of God. Love like that of God for the world, guiding and connecting us all together.

When Paul writes, “Let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts,” it's easy for us English-speakers to hear that as a call to government. Christ is the ruler – we are the subjects. Except, that's not what he says. Instead, the word he uses in Greek is a sports-term – it'd be closer to say, “Let the peace that comes from Christ be the umpire – or referee of your heart.” When we put on the style of Christ, we have a new way of making decisions – using the peace of Christ as a guide. And what is that peace? It is a peace that is of great understanding, a peace that comes from unity in diversity, a peace not of destruction and pulling down, but of taking joy in building up each other. A peace, if you will, of Christmastide.

And that takes us back to the story of Jesus in the temple. When Jesus showed the style of Christ, that peace was not understood, even by his parents. Even by the translators, it would appear. The last verse of our story that we read

today says, “Jesus went down to Nazareth with them, and was obedient to them. His mother cherished every word in her heart.” If you’re scratching your head a little bit, I don’t blame you. At the beginning of this story, Mary and Joseph leave Jesus in Jerusalem – who tells them that he had to stay behind to do his Father’s work – and the story ends with Jesus being obedient to them? How is that the arc of the style of Christ?

Well... you guessed it! Translation trouble, again. To be fair, there are a LOT of commentaries that read the story this way – it’s the traditional reading. Jesus was a perfect child, obedient to his parents. Yet, this story would show otherwise! I’m indebted to Kristen Dugas for a new read on this story. In an exhaustive study of the word *hypotasso* in the Bible, the word usually translated “obedience”, she wrote:

*... Jesus is not seen as being subject to Mary and Joseph anywhere in this passage. Therefore, Luke 2:51 should instead read as, “And He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and He **continued to be set in this way to them...**” meaning that He was continuing to do that [work] of his Father’s.¹*

In other words, instead of being obedient to them, Jesus continued to do the work of God. This story, then, isn’t about an adolescent phase, of trying on a style and discarding it when your parents disapprove. No, this story is about Jesus standing firm even against his parents, showing that the things of God are critically important. That’s the thing about the style of Christ – it may set you against the world in unusual ways. Your heart of mercy may feel close to breaking – but know that, just as Jesus was able to hold mercy, love, and peace, so can you. For when you put on the style of Christ, you know right where Jesus is, and know that you can follow him wherever he leads.

May God’s love for you be your model to love others. May you take up the style of Christ in everything you do. May the Peace of the Spirit be your umpire always. Amen.

¹ Kristen Dugas, “Hypotasso (Part Two)” (,4) <http://www.womanthegloryofman.com/pdfs/hypotasso-part-2.pdf>