

Year C-Christmas 1-Riffing Off Jesus in the Temple at Age Twelve

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Luke 2:41-52

Riffing Off Jesus in the Temple at Twelve

“Riffing” is a jazz term where the musician plays improvisationally while seeking to convey his musical thoughts on a chosen theme. As I thought about Jesus at 12 in the temple as Luke tells it, here are some of my thoughts and feelings.

Even at age 12 Jesus was beginning to penetrate to things hidden since the foundation of the world, a term Matthew coined and Girard picks up to describe the scapegoating mechanism. Yes, there are the things that have been hidden, that the world just can't see until Jesus reveals them. And already, Jesus, being the Son of God, is beginning to see the hidden victim and begins preparing to reveal him, reveal the corpse in the whited sepulcher. This is why his understanding and his answers amazed his Temple teachers. What had been hidden that Jesus was beginning to see, much to the astonishment of the teachers in the Temple. I think Jesus was beginning to see how humans build community by excluding, casting out, throwing some away, and sacrificing some to unite the rest. Already he struggles with why this can happen when all are children of God, his brothers and sisters and equally loved. People say some are loved by God while others aren't and then they separate themselves from them—Jews from Gentiles, men from women, slaves from free, to quote Paul. It is the kind of question a precocious twelve year old might ask and those called on to answer would not know what to say.

While the cultural and spiritual leaders were amazed at the profundity of Jesus' questions, (actually his question was quite simple; they just had to rethink their way of viewing God to answer it and that was beyond their capacities and would be until Jesus' death and resurrection) they couldn't answer them, though, I will wager they tried. Jesus sensed the inadequacy of their answer and begins at this young age pondering how to fix humanity so that humans had a chance at living in peace. This search for insight, this ferment that permeated

Jesus' being and probably lead to his lingering in Jerusalem in the temple dialoguing with the priests, eventually matured into his willingness to go to the cross, not to appease an offended God, but to reveal what humans do to sustain a fragile culture without God.

This revelation was his first objective in going to the cross. He wanted to show us what we do to each other and ourselves that is so costly and he did that by allowing us to do what we do to him. The absolute show stopper to this, of course, is when he forgives us while we are in the process of doing our thing to him. That event changed the world for after it we could never say we didn't know what we were doing. Now we did or at least have come to know as this contagious awareness of our "casting out" to maintain cohesion in our "in" group at the expense of the scapegoat, has permeated the world like yeast in dough.

Jesus' second reason for going to the cross entailed showing the world that God was not an angry puppeteer demanding blood, but our creator who loved his creation so deeply he would shed his own blood on the cross rather than shed the blood of those he created. In fact, the idea of punishment came entirely from the human side and had nothing to do with God. To quote from John, God is full of light and in him is no darkness at all.

Another puzzle that caught my eye in this text has Jesus being found in the Temple after three days. Why three days? The "three days" sticks out to me and I wonder if it looks forward to the three days Jesus used to empty the Temple of its sacrificial meaning and transform and transfer that meaning onto himself. Now he reconciles us to God by forgiving us after we shed his blood. Remember the curtain in the Temple separating the sacred and the profane was torn in two in the midst of the three days between the crucifixion and resurrection. We don't need the separation the curtain represented because Jesus has shown us the truth—that we are all one, all his children, all loved, no division, no dualism, no "lets divide ourselves in two so that we can fight."

When Jesus' parents found him and expressed their anxiety about his disappearance, he replied "Did you not know that I must be in my father's house?" With a twinkle in my own eye I thought to myself, "Mary and Jesus' Father, not Joseph, have joint custody and Jesus wants to

spend some time with his Father as any twelve-year-old boy would. Jesus has hybrid parentage. He is both fully human and fully God.

Well, if we have a hard time understanding this, we are not alone. The text from Luke says, “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.” In essence he told them he is the Son of God and then relinquishes all power-claims that could go with that by submitting to Joseph and Mary’s authority as his earthly parents. In this way he emptied himself becoming a human being, as it says somewhere in the Epistles. We see in this brief glimpse into Jesus’ life at age twelve both his divine nature, as Son of God, showing us the face of God, and his self-emptying willingness to be fully human just like us.

This is so big that we can’t get our minds around it and neither could Mary. The text says, “His mother treasured all these things in her heart.” She didn’t know how to put it in words so she treasured it in her heart. She didn’t know how to share it with others so she treasured it in her heart. She didn’t know what it meant or how it would unfold in history, she just knew he was somehow from God in some direct way. She knew, somehow his life would be life-transforming for all the people of the world. She let it all in, mused on it like a parent will and secretly shock her head in wonder. Meanwhile, “Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.”

These were the days when Jesus prepared himself to reveal a way to live with no division, no “us and them” and no “over against.” And now for an ad: How to live our lives in our twenty-first century will be the topic of the study we will engage beginning in late January using the book [Life At the End of Us Vs Them](#) by Marcus Peter Rempel. I am really looking forward to it and think many of you will enjoy it too.

Finally, what Jesus was preparing for, even at age twelve, was a wise way to live that, in the end and beyond the end, would curry the favor of both transformed humans and the divine. I know I want to live that way and I suspect you do too. Thanks be to God. Amen.