### “My Father’s Business” Steve Finlan for The First Church, December 29, 2024

**Colossians 3:12–17**

12As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. 13Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. 16Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. . . 17Give thanks to God the Father through Jesus.

**Luke 2:42–52**

42And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the Passover festival. 43When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. 44Assuming 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. 45When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. 46After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. 48When 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.” 49He said to them, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be about my Father’s business?” 50But they did not understand what he said to them. 51Then 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.

Lots of messages in these two passages. The letter to the Colossians, probably co-written by Paul, says “forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive” (3:13). The author says “clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony . . . let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts . . . and be thankful” (3:14–15). Oh! and then, sing hymns and spiritual songs. Okay, we can do that.

Then follows that wonderful story of Jesus talking with the teachers in the temple, astonishing them with his wise and suggestive questions, so wrapped up in what he is doing that he has forgotten to stay in touch with his family. And isn’t this often true—that time just flies when you are deeply involved with something you love? For three days he challenges the rabbis, and makes a great impression on them. Jesus tells Mary that she should have known that he would have to be about his Father’s business. But Mary is mainly anxious and worried, as any mother would be, and lets him know she is upset with him. He makes an effort to be fully obedient after this. You can imagine how he has to make an effort to rein it in, to not get into long discussions with his elders, and do other things that most 12-year-olds wouldn’t *think* of doing.

Notice that there is no miracle, except the miracle of a very bright young man with intelligent questions to ask the rabbis. Maybe he is questioning them about some of their dogmas; perhaps he is asking why they aren’t more open to foreigners, given the passages in Isaiah about their being a light to the Gentiles, and that the Gentiles will keep the covenant and worship in the temple (Isa 42:6; 56:6–7). Maybe he is quoting some of the prophetic passages that question the practice of animal sacrifice (Mic 6:6–8; Hos 6:6; Jer 7:22). Maybe he is asking them if they consider the Scriptures infallible, even though they clearly favor some passages above others. Maybe he asked questions about love and forgiveness, such as the subjects covered in the letter to the Colossians. We don’t know. All it says is that he amazed people with his understanding and his answers.

Jesus was a deep and sensitive thinker from an early age. Now, he’s still a twelve-year-old boy, and he thinks like a boy on the edge of manhood. But young people can ask very profound moral questions. He might have thought, “why aren’t you more kind to foreigners? Doesn’t God love them, too? And why do we have to kill so many animals?” These are the kind of questions that a young person could ask. There is a straightforwardness and sincerity that young people can have, which justifiably arrests the attention of their elders. Add to this the fact that young Jesus had an extraordinary knowledge of the Scriptures. Have you ever had a brilliant young student who asked the best questions? Well, multiply that by five, and you can imagine this astonishing episode.

This suggests several possible lessons for us today. One would be: be ready for young people to ask provocative and sensible questions. Young people will approach old problems in a new way, seeing them for the first time. Another would be to remark that the wisest people are not always the ones with prestigious degrees and positions. We often make the contrast book-smart and street-smart. Neither John nor Jesus had any higher education, although presumably Jesus had a synagogue education. Often the wisest insights are had by people who reason sensibly based on experience and values. A teacher I know said, “I can’t imagine ever condemning a student or telling one that there’s no hope for him or her. I would always hold out hope for any student.” There is great spiritual wisdom in that remark.

Another lesson we get from this story is that Jesus was becoming conscious of his life mission at as early as twelve years of age. What were you doing when you were in 6th or 7th grade? When he begins his public mission at about 31 years of age, he has had plenty of time to reflect upon how he will conduct himself, and what his mission will be. We have some of that contemplation and decision-making compressed into the account of his 40 days of temptation in the desert, where he decides not to use miracles to gain power (Matt 4:6–7), and not to compromise with the demonic use of power (4:9–10).

By the time he began his public mission, Jesus was fully aware of his values, of his mission, and of his chosen methods. He wasn’t going to use miracles to convince people who didn’t want to believe him. Miracles were only for people who already believed. He wasn’t going to use miraculous power to escape the violence that was eventually directed against him. Jesus was not only going to tell the truth, he was going to act in a restrained and fair manner, not taking unfair advantage of anyone’s mind. He did not use overwhelming power to frighten or convert people, which he certainly *could* have done.

Jesus not only did the right thing, but he always did it the right way, the way that respected individuals’ right to make their own free decisions. When Pilate insincerely asked “what is truth?” (John 18:38) and then handed Jesus over to be killed, it was Pilate’s free choice to make that cowardly decision. When the Sadducees and many Pharisees decided to frame Jesus and hand him over to be killed, they were acting on their own free will. When the Sanhedrin decided not to respect the story of the blind man whom Jesus healed (John 9), that was also their free choice.

God never forces us to choose rightly. God wants only freely given loyalty. And that’s true of all the advice in the letter to the Colossians. God *wants* us to bear with one another, forgive each other, clothe ourselves in love, and let the peace of Christ rule our hearts, but he will not force that on us. That’s advice to people who are open to *receiving* and *accepting* guidance. None of those attitudes can be forced upon anyone. We choose such attitudes when we recognize they are right and good, and that we *want* to be identified with God’s way. God gives us daily opportunities to share God’s love, to bring the teachings of Jesus into reality. We are filled with gratitude when we see how much God respects our freedom, and wants us to be intelligent sons, not intimidated slaves. God is not a dictator, a tyrant, but a loving father.

When we leave church today, we bring God’s love and Jesus’ revelation of that love into the world. That is our joy to share.