### “All Were Amazed” Steve Finlan for The First Church, Dec. 26, 2021

**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. 17And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

**Luke 2:41–52**

41Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. 42And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the 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 in my Father’s house?” 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.

We’re still in the season of love and joy. Joy to you all!

The story of Jesus’ interlude in the Temple is one of my favorites. The twelve year old Jesus is debating and discussing with the scholars of the Law, and “all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers” (2:47). I imagine he was answering with his characteristic sincerity and spiritual logic. He would not be making far-fetched connections or complicated academic reasoning, as some of the rabbis did, but more honest and morally sensitive questions and answers, and they weren’t used to that. I imagine him asking some straightforward moral questions for which they were really not ready. Questions like: “can we really believe that God would have asked Abraham to sacrifice his son, even if he intended to stop the sacrifice before it was carried out? Why would God toy with a father’s love this way?” It is hard to imagine God, as Jesus understood him, ever asking a father to kill his son. Jesus, even at age twelve, seems to have already known better. Possibly Jesus drew attention to failures to live up to Scriptural ideals, maybe asking “why are the Gentiles confined to a lower court outside the temple than we Jews are, when God said through Isaiah ‘my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples?’ Why can’t Gentiles serve in the temple?” (Isa 56:7). They would have had no good answer to that one. And young Jesus carried on in this way for three days, apparently not concerned about what he would eat or where he would sleep. He was absorbed in his business, which was talking about important things in his Father’s house. Poor practical Mary and Joseph simply didn’t understand what he was about. Imagine how frantic and worried they were during the three days. When Jesus saw that they did not understand, he just became quiet and obedient. He wasn’t setting out to hurt his parents. But he continued to grow in wisdom and in divine and human favor.

It is the only story we have of his youth, but it is a good one. It shows his exceptional nature, yet his willingness to be in conversation with others. One wonders whether any of the rabbis were permanently changed by this experience. Some of the Pharisees were sympathetic to Jesus and his message, later on. It would be nice to know if he had had an effect on them back before he was a teenager. I think Jesus as a young man did have an effect on people. There were a number of synagogue supervisors who allowed him to preach in their places of worship, for instance the leader of the synagogue in Nazareth, who would indeed have known the young Jesus. Luke goes on to say “he continued proclaiming the message in the synagogues of Judea” (4:44).

Anyone who has been a teacher has probably had the experience of having a student who asked remarkably good questions, or who surprised us repeatedly with very thoughtful comments. Jesus would have been any teacher’s favorite student, I think.

Today, interestingly, we have a Scripture about Jesus as a young man challenging the grownups, and another Scripture with ethical advice that draws upon Jesus’ mature teachings.

What about the message of Colossians that we have for today? It contains some stirring advice for people in congregations. The church functions well if everyone clothes him or herself “with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience” (Col 3:12). The advice to “bear with one another and . . . forgive each other” (3:13) seems especially directed at people within congregations. It is love that binds everything together in harmony (3:14). It is only within a congregation that people are going to “teach and admonish one another in all wisdom” and “sing psalms . . . and spiritual songs” (v. 16). This is great advice for a warm and thriving congregation. It is probably the kind of advice Jesus gave the apostles. This does not mean that every member of the congregation must think exactly like every other member. We need to build community with people who have their own minds and their own sets of questions. Spiritual unity means respecting the spiritual walk of other people, not forcing them to have the exact same beliefs.

Even if we succeed in practicing the love and supportiveness that Colossians calls for, there’s still a place for the challenging question and the thoughtful answer that asks us to re-think our philosophy. The disturbing and amazing questions of a young person like Jesus are something that I hope we never lose, in our experience of life. We need to be shaken up once in a while. Maybe the shining and beautiful verses of Colossians never occur unless the challenging questions are first asked. The questions open up the mind and the heart to be ready to learn something new. Challenges are not just burdens, but may be opportunities. Afterwards comes the new teaching, such as we see in Colossians, which draws upon the kindness and compassion Jesus practiced. There is nothing in world Scriptures prior to the letters of Paul and Paul’s successors that is quite like that passage with its insistence on unselfishness.

So go out and clothe yourself with compassion, kindness, and humility. Bear with one another. Sing psalms and spiritual songs. Do not be surprised if you do not all agree. Be ready for the variety that is the spice of life.