***“Debating with Scholars”*** by Stephen Finlan

At The First Church, December 30, 2018

**Galatians 4:4–7**

4God sent his Son, born of a woman . . . so that we might receive adoption as children. 6And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” 7So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

**Luke 2:42-52**

42 When Jesus was twelve years old, his parents, as usual, went up to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. 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 to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

Paul’s lesson in Galatians speaks of the gift of the Spirit and of following God as a *child* of God, rather than as a slave, “and if a child then also an heir, through God” (Gal 4:7). A slave feels suppressed and disrespected, but a child knows he is respected. *Know* that you are a child of God and heir to a spiritual destiny. You can inherit a path of endless spiritual growth. That’s a fine lesson! But today I am going to focus on the young Jesus in the temple.

Twelve-year-old Jesus must have amazed and frustrated the rabbis—amazed them with his knowledge and his intelligent questions, but frustrated them by challenging some of their biases. I surmise this based on what I know of his character: he was kind and fair-minded, but also impatient with conceitedness and offended by put-downs of foreigners. Even the twelve-year-old Jesus would have chafed at these unholy attitudes. Of course, the rabbis wouldn’t *always* be saying something offensive, but in the course of three days of debating, *someone* would have said something about unclean Gentiles, or maybe about uneducated Jews in the countryside. And when that happened, the rabbis would get their first taste of the moral and ethical feelings of this guy who would cause them such grief eighteen years later.

Now, the rabbis knew their Bible and the current interpretations. But Jesus would also know, for instance, about the division of Bible into Law, Prophets, and Writings, and the belief that the Law was the most important of these. He would have heard the opinion that Moses wrote all five books of the Law, even though one of those books describes Moses’ death and burial. Maybe Jesus raised a question about that.

Why do I say Jesus would know about these things? Because by this age, Jesus would almost certainly have had a synagogue education and become “bar mitzvah,” a “son of the commandment.” He would likely have been the star pupil in his class at the Nazareth synagogue. Can you imagine having Jesus as a student in your class, and the questions he might ask? It would be challenging. This could be scary to some teachers, but other teachers would *ride* with it, knowing how a thoughtful student benefits the whole class! We can all learn from each other.

The rabbi at Nazareth must have enjoyed young Jesus’ contributions, because he still admired Jesus years later and would allow him to preach at the synagogue. The rabbi did not feel threatened by him. Why? Because he was secure in his own beliefs. A precocious student did not frighten him. If you are confident in your faith, you are not alarmed by questions. A secure person is flexible and humble, and willing to consider new ideas. It is rigid and dogmatic people who feel threatened.

When the Jerusalem teachers encountered the twelve-year-old Jesus, they were fine. The fact that they debated with him for three days shows that they got along well enough. Maybe he got through to some of them, since later on there were at least two of these authorities, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, who became his disciples. Maybe Jesus was planting seeds. If the soil had been a little more receptive, more of his seeds would have taken root. Unfortunately, that did not happen. The priests and rabbis would cling to their power and prestige. They did not feel threatened by this youth, but they certainly *would* feel threatened by the grown-up Jesus years later.

The adult Jesus, like John before him, preached that God’s forgiveness was freely available. John and Jesus didn’t even mention the sacrificial rituals, which the priests taught as the way to forgiveness. This made the priests, the Sadducees, feel irrelevant. They foresaw a loss of prestige and income, so they felt deeply threatened. But Jesus was dedicated to prophetic, not priestly, values, right from the start.

He used a prophet when he announced the beginning of his preaching career in the Nazareth synagogue, reading from Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,” and when he finished, he rolled up the scroll and said “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:18, 21). He was announcing the merciful and miraculous nature of his ministry, and linking it with prophecy.

The Nazareth townsfolk failed to grasp his prophetic values. They started arguing and challenged him to work a miracle (Luke 4:23). Jesus then spoke of how some Gentiles—but *no Jews*—were healed in the times of Elijah and Elisha. “There were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha,” he said, “and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian” (4:27). Jesus was saying that God showed no favoritism, but loved Gentiles the same as Jews. He would have guided them *gently* to this prophetic insight, but in this case he had to confront their nationalistic arrogance, even though it enraged them. But it was *essential* to his teaching to affirm that God’s family had no national or racial boundaries. God doesn’t look at the nationality, but at the heart.

So what are our lessons? First, we should be like the Nazareth rabbi, ready to hear challenging questions and views without feeling threatened. If we really have the courage of our convictions, then we are unafraid of people who have *their* convictions and questions. Real confidence involves the willingness to hear different viewpoints, to not be rigid or feel threatened by challenges. Secure people are unafraid of those who are *different*, whether in thinking or appearance.

This seems to tie in with the Galatians lesson that we inherit the kingdom as *children* of God, not as slaves. *Because* we are beloved children, our behavior can be creative, not rigidly regimented, as the behavior of slaves has to be. When we are insecure and judgmental, we actually become slaves of our fears and insecurities. Instead, grow to be a confident child of God. Jesus came to “let the oppressed go free,” including those oppressed by fears.

And finally, remember that God healed a *Syrian* leper. Jesus invites all races and nations and has no favoritism for any, not for Israel, or for America, or for any group that wants to *own* Jesus, and get him to perform miracles for them. Jesus would release *all* the captives, that is, all the captives of selfishness, bias, or fear. Let the young Jesus discuss things with you, and don’t feel threatened. You can ask for greater understanding, and for knowledge of the will of God. God seeks to engage us in conversation. Be engaged with God!