

Read Luke 2:41-52

I thought about this Scripture last Sunday after our pitch-in dinner, when we met with our committees. I was supposed to meet with the elders, our Ministry and Counsel Committee. I was all set to attend when Leaf took me by the hand and pointed down the hallway to the nursery, where all the good toys are. At least I think that's what he wanted. It's hard to tell sometimes what toddlers want. But I didn't want to miss the Ministry and Counsel meeting, because when I served as an intern pastor years ago at Plainfield Meeting, I missed the elders meeting in which they eliminated my position, and I was out of a job. So I explained to Leaf that I couldn't play with him, that I had a meeting to attend, and he began to cry. I felt horrible, because I knew the elders wouldn't cry if I had missed the meeting. But there was Leaf, standing in the hallway, tears rolling down his cheeks, because I wouldn't play with him.

I dreamed about it that night. I dreamed we couldn't find Leaf, we were looking everywhere in the meetinghouse, and we found him in the conference room meeting with the elders. I guess I dreamed about him, because I knew I was going to be preaching on this story about Jesus with the elders.

Oh, that Jesus. Don't you bet his parents were annoyed with him? After their relief, of course, at finding him safe after three days of searching. I'm sure they hugged him first, but then I bet they set him down and got in his face. "What in the world were you thinking?" Then again, there's only so much you can do to punish a child. Punishing a child is seldom a matter of justice, because sometimes kids do things that are so over the top, there's no punishment you can give them that really evens things up. When they arrested those teenagers who allegedly sent the e-mails forcing the closure of Plainfield and Danville schools, a woman commented on Facebook. "Give them the death penalty!" Really? The death penalty? I understand that people are angry, but the death penalty? Isn't that a bit much? You might feel like doing that, but you don't do that. Still, I bet Mary and Joseph weren't nearly as genial as Luke suggests. Luke wrote that Mary "kept all these things in her heart." That sounds so sweet, doesn't it? I bet when the dust settled, Mary was one honked-off mom. Kept all these things in her heart, indeed. Not like any Jewish mother I've ever met. I bet Jesus was in deep trouble.

Nevertheless, I really like this story, because when you cut through Luke's sentimentality there are these wonderful elders of whom little is said, but who took the time to be present with a child, to answer his questions, to take his concerns seriously, to encourage his mental and spiritual development. How good of them to do that.

Luke wrote this story to emphasize the specialness, the uniqueness, of Jesus. We know that. The goal of his story is apparent. But I think what is really powerful about this story isn't the uniqueness of Jesus, there are other stories that convey that much more creatively and poetically than Luke has done here. I think what is really inspiring about this story is the uniqueness of the elders, their willingness to devote significant time and attention to an out-of-town kid they'd probably never see again. How kind and thoughtful of them to do that. Don't you just love people like that, people who recognize their responsibility to tend the next generation.

This past week, I went to visit my parents at the assisted-living place where they live. My son, Spencer, and his wife, Jessica, were there along with Madeline visiting my folks. My daughter-in-law, Jessica, is very intuitive, just a very bright young lady, and realized my mother's need to be needed, so began asking her advice about child-rearing. Mom just came alive. I haven't seen her this engaged in months. I've been reading a lot about assisted-living centers, they've been around long enough now for us to observe certain aspects of life in an assisted-living center, and one of those aspects is the high rate of reported depression among the residents. They're trying to figure out why that is, and do something about it. One place I read about it requires those who live there to have a pet, and if they don't have a pet, they'll give them a bird. The effect on the residents was amazing. The rate of reported depression dropped significantly, and the use of medicines declined one-third.

Researchers are also discovering that age segregation contributes to depression. Old people never see young people. And young people never see the elderly. So reading this gospel story about Jesus with the elders, and watching Madeline with Mom, I was reminded of a dream I have for Fairfield. I've mentioned it to a few of you. Wouldn't it be wonderful, if across the road from us, we had an assisted-living center with an attached daycare, so that the elderly residents could help provide childcare? And wouldn't it be wonderful, if a few dormitory rooms were set aside for college students, who could live there rent free in exchange for helping with, and being present with, the elderly residents. The young and the old being together, seeing one another, learning from each another.

Wouldn't that be wonderful if we Quakers could build a community that modeled the importance of intergenerational friendships? I bet you one thing, I bet those young people who posted those school threats on Facebook likely wouldn't have done that if they had elders in their lives who loved them, who engaged them, who cared for them. We have to figure out new ways of living in this country. Or better yet, discover once again what our elders knew, that we all need one another. The young need the elderly, the elderly need the young. We have to learn how to live together again. The elders who sat so patiently with Jesus knew this, and thus gladly gave their time and attention to this twelve year-old boy, on the cusp of manhood, trying to figure out life and figure out himself. They are, to me, the miracle in this story.