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Hutterthal Mennonite Church

Luke 2:39-52

15 August 2021

Growing Up

Backpack Blessing: Good morning. Every year, you go back to school around this same time in August. Just like you, when Jesus was growing up, he and his family traveled to the temple in Jerusalem every year for the Passover festival. I wonder how Jesus felt each time that his parents started packing their things for the journey. Maybe he was excited, maybe a little scared, maybe tired and dreading the long walk. It took a few days of walking to get to Jerusalem from where they lived in Nazareth. In our scripture reading from Luke chapter 2, the author tells us that when Jesus was 12 (Are any of you twelve?), they went to the temple as they usually did, and this particular time, something different happened. Jesus and his parents always took this trip with a large group of people; after the festival had finished, the group headed back to Galilee. Jesus's parents thought that Jesus was with the group when they left Jerusalem. When the group stopped for their first night on the road, they could not find him among the families in the group, so his parents, Joseph and Mary headed back to Jerusalem, very worried about where Jesus was.

When they finally found Jesus 3 days later, he was sitting in the temple with some of the rabbis. Rabbi is a Hebrew word for teacher. Now, I'm wondering if Jesus is a little bit of a nerd, Maybe this is not the first time that Jesus hung out with his teachers, asking questions. When Jesus was a child, he didn't have the same bible that we do now. All he had was the Old Testament. Maybe Jesus felt like the other teachers in his hometown in Nazareth did not answer his questions well, so he came with all of his curiosity to the rabbis in Jerusalem.

When Jesus's parents found him, they were very upset. Have you ever gotten in trouble like this when your parents didn't know where you were or you did something without their permission? Jesus's parents were very worried about him, and they were sad when they could not find him. I wonder when Jesus left the temple and the teachers behind if he was sad to go back home to Nazareth where he lived. I wonder if Jesus was grounded for not leaving with the group that his parents had been travelling with. Are there times where you were sad to leave school because what you were doing was so much fun or so interesting?

This morning as you prepare to go back to school soon, we are giving you a Jesus fish on a keychain as a reminder of our prayers for you and your teachers. It will hopefully remind you of all of the people here at church that care about you and pray for you as you go to and from school, as you work on homework, as you sit at lunch and eat with your friends, as you play at recess, and even as you get into disagreements or arguments with your classmates. You could attach the keychain to one of your zippers on your backpack so it's always with you at school. When you see this Jesus fish, you will remember that Jesus is walking right beside you in each moment of your school day; you can turn to him and pray when things are hard; and you can thank him when you succeed on an assignment or when you do the right thing even when its not easy. We are also giving a Jesus fish keychain to all of the teachers and school staff here this morning with us at church because we are praying for and thinking of them just like we are doing for you. If you are a teacher or school staff member here this morning, please stand up, and we will be praying for you also in this backpack blessing. For the rest of you who are seated, if you are near to someone standing, you are welcome to extend a hand toward them or lay a hand on their shoulder as we pray together for this coming school year. Remember kids when we pray together, we fold our hands, close our eyes, and bow our heads.

Opening Prayer:

Hutterthal Mennonite Church, good morning. And good morning to all of you who are joining us online. Welcome to all of our guests this morning. We are so glad that you are here. Let us pray: God of growth and development, of evolution and journeying, we look to you as each of us is in a different place this morning. We all have had experiences over the past week or month or year that have shaped us in ways that sometimes look more like Jesus and other times look less like Jesus. Give us your strength and mercy as we walk together and as we grow together. Who we are and how much like Jesus that we are is not a direct reflection of our age or how long we have been coming to church, but about how often we have opened ourselves to your transformative and subversive Spirit. Fill us again with your Spirit this morning. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Message:

When I was growing up, I didn't go to public school until the middle of my 5th grade year. Mom had kept my older brother, my younger brother, and I home for school. Because we came along during my oldest brothers' elementary years, mom was not able to keep them at home as long. At the beginning of my fifth grade school year, I had been hoping that the school would allow me to play in band and sing in choir without coming to school, but the middle school administrator would not allow it, so I decided that I would go to school. I walked into Mrs. Bachman's 5th grade class in January of 2001. I was terrified and excited at the same time. I felt like I needed to prove that I deserved to be in 5th grade, so I raised my hand a lot and I shouted out answers when I knew them. It was a steep-learning curve, getting used to all of the rules and classroom guidelines that keep a group of students working diligently throughout a school day. Suddenly, I had to raise my hand when I wanted to speak, and I had to wait for others to finish their work

before we could move onto another subject. When I was home-schooled, I was done with my daily work in 3 or so hours, but the public-school day was at least 7 hours, not including the bus ride to and from school. In the same way that the yearly experience of the Passover festival celebration was formative for Jesus, those early years of home-schooling and even the first few years of public school were formative for me as well. In my home-schooling, I developed an inner sense of motivation, a desire to do my best that was not dependent on the success or lack of motivation of my peers. I was often criticized in school by my classmates for throwing off the bell curve because I did well on a particular assignment, while my peers did not. In my first years in public school, I learned the importance of mutual respect and submission to the needs of those around me. I no longer was the only important person in the room as I was before. I had to be patient in moments when it felt like things were moving slowly, while I also had to learn better when to keep my mouth shut. Blurting out comments or answers was not helpful to the teacher or to my peers, but it took me a little while to master those important social and communal skills. I wonder too if this experience of asking and answering questions with the teachers in the temple was a formative experience for Jesus. I wonder if these moments from Luke chapter 2 were the beginning of Jesus noticing the gifts and talents that would one day lead to him not being a carpenter like his father Joseph, but being a rabbi, a servant of the Hebrew scriptures, a servant of his father, God Almighty.

What kinds of formative experiences did you have as a child that have stuck with you throughout your lifetime? So much of our growing up years stick with us, sometimes to our detriment and sometimes to our benefit. I wonder if this moment in the temple was the turning point for Joseph when he realized that his son was not going to spend the rest of his life as a carpenter. Maybe this experience of searching for Jesus worked in the same way for Mary, who

was starting to realize that her son was not going to always be safe and taken care of. Jesus was going to step out into the political, cultural, and social tumult of the first century, asking difficult questions and offering even more challenging answers but without necessarily the blessing of his family. We find out later in Luke's gospel that Jesus considers his family only to be those who do the will of God, not necessarily his biological kin.

What is most frustrating and irritating about this story in the gospels is that it is the only one about Jesus's childhood. We know that so much of our habits and later life-choices are shaped by what happens in childhood, yet we know so little about what happened during the time that Jesus increased in wisdom and years. We also realize as often is the case in our own lives that some of our childhood experiences foreshadow what happens later in our lives. In this story, Jesus is sought out, misunderstood, and honored for his intellectual and scriptural knowledge and prowess just like he will be one day as he walks around Galilee, teaching and healing the people. Instead of being reprimanded by his parents though and admired by the teachers in the temple, the religious and political leaders of his adult years will seek him out and kill him, while his followers will watch in amazement and distress as he is crucified.

When I was growing up, particular people in my life shaped me and formed me in powerful ways. Through my parents' example, I learned to work hard and do my best even when it was not always required of me. I learned the importance of following Jesus and learning the scriptures also from my mother, who prayed with us, memorized scripture with us, and constantly reminded us of God's presence in our lives. My youth pastor in middle school and high school helped me grow in my identity as a leader and person of integrity, the foundation of which had been laid by my parents. Late in high school, a Mennonite pastor started me on the road toward becoming an anabaptist or Christian with Mennonite convictions. Throughout my

university years, this Mennonite pastor continued to challenge me to think deeply about what it meant to follow Jesus's teaching about peace and justice in a broken world. A thousand small decisions, some encouraged and some forced, throughout my childhood have made me who I am today. I wonder who those people were in Jesus's life. Maybe some of the teachers in Jerusalem were ones that Jesus interacted with every year. I'm sure that both Mary and Joseph shaped Jesus as well. Maybe Jesus spent a lot of time with John the Baptist as well, his cousin according to some scholars or at least a relative. Who were the people that shaped you during your childhood?

As we begin another school year, we ask for God's inspiration and leading as we seek the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives as well as in the school days of our students, teachers, and school staff. We pray for our kids and all of the adults who will play an important part in their increase in wisdom and stature. We realize that each of us can play an important role in encouraging and supporting the children of Hutterthal, the we could be a formative influence in the lives of the generations after us.

Closing Prayer:

God of grace and peace, we thank you for your presence and hope with us today. Give us eyes to see how our years of experience have shaped us into who we are today and how we can continue to be transformed your Spirit. Give us the strength in each day to be the hands and feet of Jesus in the lives of our children and our neighbors. In Jesus' name. Amen.