

Christmas Eve Family Mass, 2021: Holy Trinity Church: December 24, 2021

Luke 2:41-52: *When our Children Teach Us*

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Boys and Girls, I want to tell you three stories on this Christmas Eve.

I. FIRST AND MOST IMPORTANT STORY, THERE IS LOVE

Some years ago, the Journal of the American Medical Association published an article by Dr. Paul Ruskin on the “Stages of Aging.” In the article, Dr.

Ruskin described a case study he had presented to his students when teaching a class in medical school. He described the case study patient under his care like this: “The patient neither speaks nor comprehends the spoken word.

Sometimes she babbles incoherently for hours on end. She is disoriented about person, place, and time. She does, however, respond to her name... I have worked with her for the past six months, but she still shows complete

disregard for her physical appearance and makes no effort to assist her own care. She must be fed, bathed, and clothed by others.

“Because she has no teeth, her food must be pureed. Her shirt is usually soiled from almost incessant drooling. She does not walk. Her sleep pattern is erratic. Often, she wakes in the middle of the night and her screaming awakens others. Most of the time she is friendly and happy, but several times a day she gets quite agitated without apparent cause. Then she wails until someone comes to comfort her.”

After presenting the class with this challenging case, Dr. Ruskin then asked his medical students if any of them would like to volunteer to take care of this person. No one volunteered. Then Dr. Ruskin said, “I’m surprised that none of you offered to help, because actually she is my favorite patient. I get immense pleasure from taking care of her... and I am learning so much from her. She has taught me a depth of gratitude I never knew before. She has taught me the spirit of unwavering trust. And she has taught me the power of unconditional love.” Then Dr. Ruskin said, “Let me show you her picture.” He pulled out the picture and passed it around. It was the photo of his six-month-old baby daughter.

My dearest boys and girls, I like that story for several reasons. For one thing, it shows us the importance of perspective. And it shows us how essential it is to have all the facts before we make a decision. It reminds us too, that our children have so much to teach us... if we will just tune in and pay attention. But also, it reminds me of this story of young Jesus lingering behind as a 12-year-old boy and gets separated from His family for three days. Eventually they find Jesus in the Temple discussing theology with the rabbis. Now, can you imagine the state of panic His parents must have been in by then? But, He says to them, mom and dad, “Didn’t you know that I would be here doing my Father’s work?” This is our first clue that Jesus is growing up and becoming a man... a man with a sacred and special mission. When His parents started the trek back home, 12-year-old Jesus stayed behind caught up in the theological discussions for the first time. They rushed back (worried sick, I’m sure) and found Him three days later in the Temple. He thought they would know that He would be doing exactly what they had taught Him to be a person of deep faith. Of course, the story is also a foreshadowing. You see my girls and boys, it is here to remind us that Jesus has come into this world to be the Savior of the world.

Now, we can imagine that as Jesus was growing up, His parents taught Him many good lessons about life and faith, but imagine, too, the powerful lessons

they must have learned from Him. Our children have so much to teach us. With that in mind, let's think together for a few moments about the great lessons our children are teaching us. There are many of course. Let me mention three of them.

II. THE SECOND STORY IS ABOUT GRATITUDE

Some years ago, I was in the seminary in a small Southern Indiana town. There was a little boy born blind. His mother and father were heartsick, but they struggled with his blindness the best they could. Like all such parents, they prayed and hoped for some miracle. They wanted so much for their son to be able to see. Then one day when the little boy was 5 years old, the community doctor told them that he had heard about a surgeon at the famous and prestigious Massachusetts General Hospital who was specializing in a new surgical procedure that might just work for their son... that might just give their little boy his eyesight.

The parents became excited at the prospect, but when they investigated further and discovered the cost of the surgery and the travel and the hospital expense involved, they became deflated because they were not people of means at all. In fact, some would call them poor. But word got out in the community

and their church rallied to help them. In a short period of time, the money was raised to send them to Boston for the surgery.

On the morning they were to leave for Boston, the little boy gathered his things together including his tattered little teddy bear. It had an ear chewed off, was missing an eye, and was bursting at the seams. His mother said, “Son, why don’t you leave that old teddy bear at home? He’s about worn out. Maybe we can buy you a new one in Boston or when we get back.” But he said, “No, I need it.” So off to Boston they went. He held tightly onto that teddy bear all the way. The surgeon sensed how important the teddy bear was to the little boy, so he allowed the boy to keep the bear with him throughout all the many examinations prior to surgery. On the morning of the surgery, the hospital staff brought in two surgical gowns – one for the little boy and a smaller version for the teddy bear – and off to the operating room they went... a little blind boy on a stretcher holding on dearly to his beloved teddy bear.

The surgery went well. The doctor felt good about what they were able to accomplish. “I think he will be able to see,” said the surgeon, “but we won’t know for sure until we remove the bandages in a few days.”

Finally, the day came for the doctor to remove the bandages. The nurses and interns stood with the parents as the surgeon slowly unwound the gauze from the boy's eyes. Miracle of miracles! The little boy could see! For the first time in his life... he saw his mommy's face, then he saw his daddy and his doctor, he saw flowers and candy and balloons and the people who had cared for him. For the first time in his life, he saw his teddy bear. It was a joyous celebration!

When it came time for the boy to leave the hospital, his surgeon came into the room. The doctor had grown so attached to the little boy that he had to busy himself with those insignificant gestures that we use when we are trying to surmount a great wall of emotion. They said their good-byes with tears of joy all around and then the doctor turned to leave. The little boy called him back.

"Doctor," the little boy said. "I want you to have this." He was holding out the teddy bear! The doctor tried to refuse, but the little boy insisted. "Doctor, I don't have any money. So, I want to give you my teddy bear to pay you for helping me to see. I want you to have it. It's my way of saying, 'Thanks.'" The doctor took the teddy bear and shook the little boy's hand and wished him well. For a long time after that... on the 10th floor of the White Building of Massachusetts General Hospital, there was on display... a teddy bear, bursting at the seams with a chewed-off ear and one eye. And there was a sign

under it written in the hand of that surgeon. It read: “This is the highest fee I have ever received for professional services rendered.”

That little boy was so thrilled that he now could see. So, in response, he gave away his most prized possession. There’s a name for that... it’s called thanksgiving. Now of course, that kind of appreciation must be learned, but when our children learn it and express it so beautifully, it touches us and teaches us... the beauty, the power, the importance, and the necessity of gratitude.

III. THE THIRD AND FINALLY STORY, THERE IS OUR FAITH

What is faith boys and girls? It’s trusting God, come what may. It’s committing your life to Him and trusting Him in every circumstance.

My Uncle John was a priest. John told me a story long long ago about your age boys and girls about a very moving story that makes the point. A little girl had somehow received a bad cut in the soft flesh of her eyelid. The doctor knew that some stitches were needed, but he also knew that because of the location of the cut, he should not use an anesthetic. He talked with the little girl and he told her what he must do... and asked her if she thought she could stand the touch of the needle without jumping. She thought for a moment, and then said simply, “I think I can... if Daddy will hold me while you do it.” So, the father took his little girl in his lap, steadied her head against his shoulder,

and held her tightly in his arms. The surgeon then quickly did his work... and sewed up the cut in her eye-lid... and the little girl did not flinch. She just held on tight to her Father. That's a parable. That story is for all of us in our spiritual lives and a graphic reminder that whatever we must face, we can hold on tight to our Father... and God will see us through. There's a word for that... it's called TRUST or FAITH. It's surely what Jesus had in mind when he said, "Unless you become like a little child, you cannot enter the kingdom of God."

It's surely what St. Paul had in mind when he said; "I'm ready for anything for Jesus Christ is my strength." The quality of faith, the commitment to trust in God, come what may! Mommy's and Daddy's, Boys and Girls of every age, the spirit of childlikeness is so important... and our children have so much to teach us. How great it is when they teach us the powerful lessons of LOVE GRATITUDE AND FAITH. MERRY CHRISTMAS. AMEN