

Mark 8:27-38

9/13/2009

First day of Sunday School...

As we begin a new school year, as our children flock back to our socialized educational systems, I would like, for a moment, to explore the childhood of a certain someone.... not me but Jesus. In our Bibles, when we explore them, we only find one event in the life of Jesus between his infancy and the extremely young age of 30, which seems younger and younger to me personally. But in the Bible, we are told that at the ripe age of 12, Jesus separated himself from his parents and was found in the Temple. The only thing we Biblically know of Jesus' young life is that he caused parental consternation and frustration and had leanings toward the religious. Not surprising. But outside of the Bible, there are other accounts which tell a different story. One of these, which did not make the biblical cut for good reasons, attempts to show how Jesus blundered and floundered as he grew into being the Son of God. This morning, I would like to share with you that portion from the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, written in the second Century.

It begins "And when Jesus was five years old, there fell a great rain upon the earth, and ...Jesus collected... [the water] into a fish-pond... He took of the clay which was of that fish-pond, and made of it to the number of twelve sparrows. And it was the Sabbath when Jesus did this.... But the boys [who were watching]... said to Joseph His father: Behold, thy son was playing along with us, and he took clay and made sparrows, which it was not lawful to do on the Sabbath; and he has broken it. And Joseph went... to... Jesus, and said to Him: Why hast thou done this, when it was not lawful to do that on the Sabbath? And Jesus opened His hands, and ordered the sparrows, saying: Go up into the air, and fly; nobody shall kill you. And they flew... The... [boys] seeing what had happened, wondered, and went away and told the miracles which Jesus had done. But a Pharisee [boy] who was with Jesus took an olive branch, and began to let the water out of the pond which Jesus had made. And when Jesus saw this, He said to him in a rage: Thou impious and ignorant Sodomite, what harm have my works... done thee? Behold, thou shalt become like a dry tree, having neither roots, nor leaves, nor fruit. And immediately the Pharisee dried up, and fell to the ground, and died. And his parents took him away dead, and [the parents] approached Joseph, saying: See what thy son has done; teach him to pray, and not to blaspheme.

And before you grow alarmed, rest assured, that according to the story, Jesus does also zap some people back to life too, and we do know that Jesus eventually learns to forgive. But my point in bringing this selitious and seditious bit of non-canonical Gospel is not to claim that it is the truth. Jesus was not a sociopath. But the odd text does bring to mind an important fact: Jesus had to grow up. Like each of us, he had to learn to be an adult. To be fully human meant a series of trial and error. He had to work up to forgiveness, and loving enemies, and accepting the grace of God. It all took more than one event at the age of 12.

For the past few weeks, in our Gospel readings, one could easily say that we have been examining just how Jesus grew into his radical understanding of God's love. Even though they are not accounts of childhood, they are accounts which show Jesus learning. Two weeks ago, we heard the Pharisees condemn Jesus for eating with unwashed hands. And we saw how Jesus begins to understand that God's grace is larger and more encompassing than any rules we make

about God. Luckily, he does not kill that Pharisee. Then, this past week, Jesus ventures outside of his home territory and meets a woman who is not Jewish, a gentile, but who needs his help. Jesus, at first, condemns the woman. He harshly calls her a dog, and yet, because this woman refuses to leave him, because she trusts in him, Jesus realizes that God is the God of everyone, Jewish and gentile alike. And Jesus heals the woman. And then, we have today's Gospel reading. In today's gospel reading, Jesus is further away from Jerusalem. He enters the Roman town Caesarea Philippi, a foreign territory for a good Jew. And in the midst of this environment, in the place of a Temple for sacrificing, and a different understanding of God, we hear Jesus accept his identity as our Savior. And we also hear him define what that reality means. "Then Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again".

And let's be clear, Jesus is speaking about the choice to become the Messiah of a God of love. As the child of an omnipotent God, Jesus could "save" the world in one of two ways. First, Jesus could take over the world, and force us into a slavery of love, in which we are ordered to be at peace and to love, without choice and without integrity. It would be Eden, but we would not have chosen it. Secondly, God can give us the integrity to be in relationship with God, with the consequence that we might not live into that relationship for thousands of years. We might not ever live into that relationship. And as we know, Jesus chooses the latter.

Peter, as I suppose many of us, have difficulty with Jesus' choice. We think that an adult God would feed all of the poor, end hunger, end illness, rule the nations, provide health care, reform our schools, end political strife, end suffering, end violence and even our memories of violence. Wouldn't it be lovely to not be plagued with the memories of violence this week? And those are the possibilities which Satan offered to Jesus in the wilderness: the opportunity to rule the world and turn stones to bread. Jesus does not accept that offer.

Jesus makes the choice to love us as equals, a truly adult, salvific decision. Jesus decides to allow us to be free. He forgives us, because he understands that such freedom will seem impossible. He loves us, no matter what. And God continues to dwell amongst us, to be an equal with us on the earth and in heaven. And Jesus painfully understands that he is leaving us and himself to potential suffering by making that choice. Even he will suffer and be killed for love.

But I am convinced that the reason that Jesus could face his own difficulties and commends us to face our own, is because he ultimately trusts in our goodness and in God's goodness. God has not given us anything that, with grace, we cannot face. I really believe that Jesus is willing to face the Good Fridays of life simply because he understands that to face Good Friday in love and forgiveness is also to welcome in Easter Sunday. Jesus has faith that if we love, there is a safety net. There is a safety net of our being here for one another. There is a safety net of finding a God who walks with us through every darkness.

We know that fact from Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. I suspect that we know it from our own. I certainly know it as your priest. I have come to know many of you in better and newer ways in the past year even in the midst of many Good Friday's, and I am ever more faithful, that if we reach out to one another, we can be each other's Easter and safety net in the coming year.

There is an old spiritual called “Wade in the Water.” “Wade in the water. Wade in the water children. Wade in the water. God’s gonna trouble the water.” It is a hymn from the underground railroad. It is a song that calls to mind the crossing of the Red Sea. It is a song which makes blunt an odd passage from the Gospel of John. In that passage, God troubles healing waters in a pool in Jerusalem, and if people enter the water after the troubling, they are healed. This should be our theme song.

At a performance of “Wade in the Water”, a group, Sweet Honey in the Rock introduced the song by saying this: And if there is a promise of a storm, and you want change in your life, walk into it. If you get on the other side, you will be different. And if you want change in your life, and you are avoiding the trouble, you can forget it.” (Carnegie Hall)

I don’t necessarily know where you are in your life. I hope and pray that you are already feeling Easter. But we are and have all been in different places. And if you’re not at Easter. If you see Good Friday, and storms, and troubled waters on the horizon, I invite you to meet them with God’s love. Ask for help. Forgive with abandon. Make the choice to be in relationship with God, and eventually, the storm will pass, Saturday will come, the waters will calm, and you will find yourself at Easter.

My brothers and sisters, we begin another season... Together.