

May 18, 2014
Confirmation Sunday
Amber Alert!
Luke 2:41-52

Opening words: This is confirmation Sunday at Western Reserve. By noon today we will welcome eight new members into the life of this church. However, that is not really important to me. What is important to me is the salvation of their souls. Confirmation means they are ready to tell their world that Jesus is their Lord and Savior. Before I preach this morning I want you to hear their names so we can pray for each one. God not only loves them but has a special purpose for their lives.

These are the names:

Morgan Eichert
Erica Ferguson
Gregory Halley
Ryan Knarr
Riley Miller
Nathan Powell
Racquel Schertzer
Delaney Schumacher

Will you pray for them with me?

Luke 2:41-52 Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. ⁴² When he was twelve years old, they went up to the festival, according to the custom. ⁴³ After the festival was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. ⁴⁴ Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵ When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. ⁴⁶ After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷ Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸ When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." ⁴⁹ "Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" ⁵⁰ But they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁵¹ Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. ⁵² And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.

Over 2,000 years ago a young Greek artist named Timanthes studied under a respected tutor. After several years, the teacher's efforts seemed to have paid off when Timanthes painted an exquisite work of art. Unfortunately, he became so enraptured with the painting that he spent days gazing at it. One morning when he arrived to admire his work, he was shocked to find it blotted out with paint.

Angry, Timanthes ran to his teacher, who admitted he had destroyed the painting. "I did it for your own good. That painting was retarding your progress. Start again and see if you can do better." Timanthes took his teacher's advice and produced Sacrifice of Iphigenia, which is regarded as one of the finest paintings of antiquity.

I hate to say it on this confirmation Sunday, but that story could be the story of the mainline church today. Could it be we have grown satisfied with ourselves? After all, we are not bad people. In comparison to the cast of characters on the evening news we look good. No one here has taken a life. No one here has embezzled funds. No one here has ever kidnapped a single individual. In comparison to so many in our world, we look good. However, in comparison to Jesus, each one of us has some work to do. Our Wesleyan tradition tells us we are always striving for perfection. This morning's Gospel lesson will help you make some progress in the faith. Are you making any progress in the faith? If you have some work to do, say, **"Amen!"**

This story has a happy ending. The date was February 6, 2014. The victim was 6-day-old Kayden Powell. Obviously, he did nothing wrong. He was sleeping in his bassinet in his mother's Beloit, Wisconsin home. He was suddenly gone. The amber alert was signaled. You know the amber alert. It is the alert that is given when a child goes missing. In time, it was revealed that he was taken by his aunt, Kristen Smith. It didn't take Dick Tracey to figure it out. Unannounced, she took the baby and headed for her home in Colorado. The police suspected her from the very beginning. They found her at a gas station on Interstate 80. She hid the baby in a bag, where the police heard him crying. Kayden was returned to his mother. Kristen was charged with federal kidnapping. If you are glad Kayden is safe, say, **"Amen!"** Did you know, according to the Department of Justice, 685 children have been saved by the amber alert system?

This story has a happy ending. It happened about two thousand years ago near Jerusalem in Israel. You can find the story only in one place, the second chapter of Luke. According to the text, Jesus was twelve years old. (2:42) That was a significant year in the life of a young Hebrew man. For it was during that year he would begin his studies to take his place among the men in the faith. Perhaps, that is why Mary and Joseph went to Jerusalem? Or perhaps, they went to Jerusalem every year for the Passover, as was required by the law. We really don't know why they were in Jerusalem, but we do know they were returning home. The distance between Jerusalem and Nazareth was and is 63 miles as the crow flies. In reality, it was more like 68 miles, because no road is perfectly straight. You do the math. If you walk about 4 mph, then it would have taken 17 hours to get home. The journey was not done in isolation. The pilgrims returned home in large packs. They walked with family and friends, who filled the hours of traveling with various discussions. Jesus was twelve years old, and twelve-year-old boys are beginning to explore their independence. It would not have been natural for Jesus to travel with his parents. Mary and Joseph assumed their son was traveling with his friends. They assumed wrong. Jesus was missing. They send out a first century amber alert.

They asked everyone with ears the question, "Have you seen Jesus?" Everyone answered, "No!" With no other option, Mary and Joseph returned to the Golden City. (They had to go back! How do you tell God you have lost his son?) After three days of searching, they find Jesus in the temple. They try to reprimand him, but their words seem to fall on deaf ears. They thought Jesus was lost, but he knew where he had been the entire time. He was in his father's house. If you are glad that Jesus was safe, say, "**Amen!**" Listen to what I am about to say.

The story of Jesus at twelve years old is really our story. We are lost and we don't even know it. Spiritually, we think we are doing fine, but you not. This is the question I have to ask you this morning. Are you making any progress in the faith? You are not going to make any progress in the faith until you do what Jesus did in the story. What did Jesus do? We find out in verse 46. It says:

After three days they (Joseph and Mary) found him (Jesus) in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.

Did you hear what Jesus did to grow spiritually? First, Jesus listened. The Master didn't talk, he listened. Second, Jesus asked questions. He didn't ask sarcastic questions to criticize. He asked questions to expand his understanding. If we spent more time listening, and more time asking probing questions, then we would grow spiritually too. So if you are ready to begin, say, "**Amen!**"

Jesus Listened

First, Jesus listened. Jesus was sitting in the temple with the teachers and he was listening to what they were saying. In other words, when Jesus was listening, Jesus was learning. You know it is true. We are not very good at listening. However, we are excellent at talking. Have you ever gone to church and tried to listen, but the person next to you won't stop talking? There seems to be a national shortage of good listeners. If you don't believe me, then just google this question: how can I become a better listener? Everyone seems to have list to help us. Even dumblittleman.com. This is their list of seven ways to become a better listener:

1. Remove all distractions
2. Be present
3. Wait for the other person to stop talking
4. Don't assume anything
5. Look at non-verbal communication
6. Clarify
7. Ask questions

Do the people in your life consider you a good listener? When you come to church, do you spend more time listening or talking? It is my job to communicate the divine Biblical truth in a clear way. It is your job to listen to the divine truth. American author Bryant H. McGill once said, "*One of the most sincere forms of respect is to actually listen to what another has to say.*" How much do you respect the people in your life? How much do you respect me? How much do you respect God?

If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"** I don't want to shock you, but you don't know everything. You may want to stop talking and listen.

Jesus Questioned

Second, Jesus asked questions. When I was young, I lived in a home that was built in the 20's. If you lived in a home built in the 20's, you know they weren't built like homes today. Homes built during that decade did not have air conditioning or decks. However, they did have front porches. We never sat on the front porch, except when the weather grew hot. I have fond memories of those hot evenings, because the entire neighborhood sat on their front porches at the same time. That is how we got to know our neighbors. When I was young, I would journey to our neighbor's front porch. Her name was Mrs. Ortmyer. I thought she was as old as the hills. (She was probably about 57.) She served me the same snack regularly, ginger ale and soda crackers. Every night I would ask a mountain of questions. Why is it so hot in the summer? Why is it so cold in the winter? Why is the grass green and the snow white? How can birds fly and fish swim? Every evening our discussion ended the same way. She would cup her hands over her ears and say, "Russell, go home! When you get older you will have all the answers you want." I have to say it. Mrs. Ortmyer was wrong! I am older, but I still have a mountain of questions. Why are some born with so much and some so little? Why are all my friends fighting the battle of the bulge, yet someone in our world dies every seven seconds from a lack of food? How can you raise two children in the same house and they end up so different? Have you ever asked those kinds of questions? When I get to heaven, I have a mountain of questions for God. How many questions do you have for God?

There is nothing wrong with asking questions. Jesus asked questions. Look at verse 46 again. It says, *"After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions."* There is nothing wrong with a sincere question. Asking God a sarcastic question just shows your arrogance. Asking God a sincere question means you are simply trying to understand. Look at it this way. If you don't ask questions, it means you don't care enough to try to understand. If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"** Ask God all the questions you like. Don't worry, He can handle it! Jesus grew spiritually because he listened and asked questions.

This is Confirmation Sunday, and on this day we will confirm eight wonderful people. They have been working hard. They began this process back in September. I have no clue how many hours they have spent together listening about Jesus in the classroom and on various trips. I have no clue how many questions they have asked. I have no clue how many hours they spent with their mentors. I have no clue how many times they helped in worship. However, I do know this. I am proud of each one of them. For this reason, I almost feel bad saying the next line. Today is not the completion of anything. It is only the beginning! We have only planted a seed that will grow for decades to come.

In just a few minutes, they will become one of us, people who are always striving for an impossible goal, to be like Jesus! Are you becoming a little more like Jesus every day? Or are you satisfied with your present state?

Let me end this message with an illustration that haunts me late at night. I originally heard it years ago at Lakeside. It was told by Tom Tewell, who was the pastor of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. It happened during his ordination interview. He was interviewed by a small group of Presbyterian ministers who had to approve him for ordination. He said they covered the various areas of systematic theology and church history. They talked about his personal life and the holy habits. They talked about his future dreams. Everything was going well, and there came a point when it felt like he was going to be approved. One of the interviewers said, "Tom, we only have one more question." It was asked by the oldest man on the interview team. (He was 57!) He said, "Mr. Tewell, are you making any progress in the faith?" Tom said he opened his mouth and nothing came out! That is an excellent question.

Are you making any progress in the faith? If you don't know how to answer that question, then do two things. They are the same two things Jesus did when he was twelve years old. First, start listing and learn the divine truth. It is my job to communicate it clearly. It is your job to listen. Second, ask questions to expand your understanding. Do you care enough to ask a sincere question? Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote, *"It is only because he became like us that we can become like him."*

Will you pray with me?