

First Sunday after Christmas Day – Jessica Chambers

1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Psalm 148; Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2:41-52

Now that the excitement over good food, presents, and family is ebbing the world can forget about Christmas and move on to celebrating the New Year. For Christians, however, our calendar already turned with the beginning of Advent, and we cannot so easily forget Christmas and move on. Our Savior has just been born; he dwells among us. Now that he's here, what are we to do? If today's Gospel reading leaves you somewhat perplexed, you're not alone. I'm confused, the priests are amazed, and even Mary does not understand. To be a disciple of Jesus means to be like Jesus. Who we believe Jesus is – directly affects our understanding of what it means to be his disciple. How, though, can we be like someone whose own mother does not understand him? In a world of New Year's resolutions and in a world that largely rejects Christian commitments, what does it mean to follow Jesus?

Those of you who are familiar with the book of Samuel will know that Hannah could not bear children, but prayed desperately for a son and promised that in return, she would give that son over to God. And when she received Samuel, she kept her promise. Samuel ministered with the priests in Jerusalem even as a boy. The infancy narrative of Jesus tells us that Mary, who was not even married yet, did not ask for a son, but was obedient enough to say yes to receiving a son who was meant for God. When we look at children, we see potential. We see potential for greatness, for success, for prosperity. When we look at the boy Samuel and the boy Jesus, however, we see potential for something different. We see potential not for personal greatness, power, or financial gain. Instead we see potential for a life of obedience to God. In the birth of Christ and in the Christmas season, we see potential.

In the Gospel reading for the day, I, along with Mary and Joseph, am confused by a boy who, when his parents leave for the five-day journey home, stays behind in the Temple to learn. I, along with Mary and Joseph, am confused by a boy who does not understand his parents' anxiety over his absence and who thinks it should have been clear where he was. I am even more confused by a boy who is clearly wise beyond his years and has priorities that differ from those of his parents, but who goes back to Nazareth and continues to obey his parents anyway. I am confused by this boy because I, too, have priorities that greatly differ from my parents, and I never thought twice about disobeying them when our priorities clashed. I'm confused by the boy who chooses to go home because I couldn't be bothered to spend more than two days with my parents this Christmas.

I am not alone in my confusion about who Jesus is. His own family does not understand him. In today's text they are confused by his insistence that God is his Father; they are confused about the rest of his life too. The Pharisees and Sadducees do not understand him. In typical Jewish

fashion, they question him – about work on the Sabbath, about paying taxes, about marriage, about anything, really. And they are confused by his answers. His own disciples often do not understand him – they want him to fight rather than die, they don't always understand his parables, and for the most part, they don't even understand who he is. The person of Jesus isn't easy for us to understand, but if we truly want to be his disciples, we must learn to be like him. Being a disciple of Jesus means being like Jesus, and being like Jesus requires obedience to God.

Jesus' early life is evidence of his life committed to obeying God. Jesus was born to an observant and devout Jewish family; Joseph traveled yearly to the Temple in Jerusalem to make the sacrifice required by Jewish Law, and even though Mary and the boy Jesus were not required to go, they did. Then, Jesus obeys God by staying in the Temple to learn and he keeps the fifth commandment by returning to Nazareth with his parents and continuing to obey them.

How to obey God is an important question – or at least one that we ask a lot. We often ask, "What does God want me to do?" I'm not very good at answering this sort of question. How am I supposed to know what it means to obey God? Well, the Colossians text, while not as specific or complete of an answer as I would like, is a place to start. The Colossians text can help us to understand this Jesus who so confuses even his own parents. It tells us what is required for a life of obedience to God using words that describe the person of Jesus found throughout the Gospels. The lepers, the blind men, the hungry, and the widows can all attest to the compassion and kindness of Jesus. Rarely in the Gospels do we find Jesus angry, and his gentleness is evinced by the way he speaks to those he heals. His humility is evident in his amazement at the faith of the centurion who asks for his servant to be healed; it is evident when he eats with tax collectors and sinners.

I like to think that I am all of these things: compassionate, kind, humble, forgiving, and loving. Most of the time, however, I am none of these. I prefer to be oblivious to the suffering around me so I do not have to feel empathy or exercise compassion. I'm rarely kind; the world is not kind, so why should I be? Humility is something I barely understand, so why should I bother trying to be it? Meekness entails gentleness and submission; those sound like weaknesses to me.

What is listed next in the Colossians text is bearing with one another in forgiveness. Then the text says to love and that loving one another is what makes possible each of the other things listed. The author says to teach and to admonish one another. Jesus' love and forgiveness are obvious throughout the Gospels. He also does not hesitate to admonish or reprimand his disciples. While these things are so evident in the life of Jesus, they are all really hard for me. Forgiveness – is hard. Really hard. When someone wrongs me, sustained forgiveness is the last thing on the mind. Love is hard too. Love entails putting others before oneself. I'm really selfish – I don't want to think about anyone before me. Also, very few of my friends have ever received an admonition from me. I want them to think I'm a good friend, so I tell them what I

think they want to hear. It's easier that way. Typically, my priorities lie with myself rather than with a life of obedience to God.

Jesus' answer to Peter's question in Matthew about how many times one is to forgive another indicates that these are not things that we do once and we're done. Jesus is not compassionate to only one person; he does not only forgive us once. He continually admonishes his disciples, the Pharisees, and anyone who needs it. The text says to bear with one another in forgiveness. To bear with means to sustain and to endure. These words indicate continued action – continual forgiveness, compassion, humility. Even in my confusion over these characteristics and general failure at them, I can begin to see that they entail a life of obedience to God. Jesus is forgiving, loving, compassionate, and kind because he obeys God. He behaves in the very way that he asks us to behave. Following Jesus means sustained obedience to God.

Like the boy Samuel and the boy Jesus, we are all children. We all have potential. We can choose to obey our potential for greatness, wealth, and power. Or we can choose to be obedient to God. If we want to be Christian, if we want to follow Jesus, if we want to be like Jesus, we must choose the latter – we must choose obedience to God. If we want to be like Jesus, we do not get to choose when to be forgiving, loving, or kind. Jesus' life is a life of obedience through continued forgiveness, love, and kindness.

As this year fades into next, we can remember Christmas by remembering our potential. We can see the New Year as an opportunity for discipleship. The New Year's resolutions to exercise more, eat less chocolate, or cut back on caffeine are all admirable, but maybe this year, our New Year's resolutions should look more like the list we find in Colossians. While compassion, kindness, love, humility, and forgiveness are not as concrete as exercise, chocolate, and caffeine, maybe they will make us become more like Jesus. Sometimes these things are hard to understand, and can even be downright confusing, but we are told that they are required of us if we want to be Jesus' disciples. The world is confused by goals that are not measurable and are not comparable or competitive, and sometimes the world rejects them outright. Fulfilling our potential for discipleship will be confusing to the world around us. But if Jesus' life of sustained obedience was so confusing to those around him, maybe our lives should be equally confusing to the world around us.