

Heart Treasures

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
June 1, 2025 – A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship with Communion
Scholarship Sunday
Text: Luke 2:41-52

Scholarship Sunday has always been a very special Sunday here in our church. In years past we have awarded as many as a half dozen Barbara Murano Scholarships to the youth of our church and this year we are excited to present two. Unfortunately, as already noted, our two recipients this year are unable to be here for reasons directly connected to their future hopes and dreams! Hazel is participating in the production of an independent movie being filmed locally in which she was offered a part as a background actor! Ivy is still in classes in New York City and just could not make it home. Honestly, I'm excited for both of them. Who would walk away from a part in a movie? Who wouldn't want to be in New York City building a whole new life? Life happens differently than we plan most of the time, doesn't it. Thus we are left with the road not traveled. We all have one, I'm sure.

Our text from Luke this morning offers us an opportunity to look at how life unfolds, often unexpectedly, especially as children grow up and leave home. This particular story from Luke is one of the rare stories we have about Jesus as a child and it is a story rich with details teasing our imaginations, if we let it. In this story, Jesus is 12 years old, and he is accompanying his parents -- Mary and Joseph -- to the Temple in Jerusalem, something the text says they did annually for the festival of the Passover. They traveled as part of a whole group from their village to and from Jerusalem, a common practice in the Judaism of Jesus' day. At that time, the Jewish faith was understood to be best practiced communally rather than individually. Thus the communal nature of even travel

to the holy city, no doubt singing the “psalms of ascent” we still find in the Psalms of our Bibles. Plus, it almost goes without saying that it would have been much safer to travel as part of a group when robbers and bandits frequented the roadways.

Once Jesus, his parents and their traveling companions reached Jerusalem, they spent three days participating in the Passover Festival and all its rituals and sacrifices performed at the Temple. Then, it was time for them to make their way back home and off they went walking back to Nazareth with the folks they had come with. Since Jesus was 12, a sociable boy and a responsible son, Mary and Joseph assumed he had blended in with the crowd of friends for the journey home. This is why they didn’t notice he wasn’t with them for an entire day. Once they determined he wasn’t, they immediately went back to Jerusalem to search for him. They looked for him there for three days before they found him in the Temple, sitting and talking with the teachers and rabbis there. He was asking them questions. They were asking him questions and Luke tells us they were amazed by his answers. Needless to say, when they finally found him there, Mary and Joseph were not happy with him. Mary, as any mother would, greets him with these words: “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety!” A bit of an understatement there, I think. What’s really interesting of course is how Jesus answers her.

Luke tells us Jesus responded by saying, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” This sounds an awful lot like a rebuke from a 12 year old boy to his parents, clearly not the response they were expecting! As we consider this, it’s also worth noting that we do not know *if* Mary had told Jesus his birth story yet. It would certainly be understandable if she hadn’t. How would you even start that

conversation with a child? “Oh, by the way son, God is your real father through miraculous means. Joseph is just a really good guy who agreed to go along with raising you until God’s plans for you become clear.” Yikes! Talk about a difficult conversation to have with your kid! But we have to stop to consider this as a legitimate question. Did he know or didn’t he? His knowledge of his birth story, or lack thereof, puts a whole different spin on this situation.

We usually read this story assuming he already knew, but now we have to wonder if he did. If he did, then we wonder along with Jesus why Mary and Joseph didn’t look for him in the Temple first, once they realized he was missing. But, if we consider that maybe he didn’t know his own birth story, then this story becomes even more powerful. In this instance his deep and powerful desire to learn all he could about God and the Scriptures would have compelled him to search out the teachers in the Temple. It makes perfect sense that he also lost track of time and everything else except what he was hearing. And his response to his mother when they finally find him could sound even more accusatory. “Of course I would be in my Father’s house. Where else would I be, mother. You of all people should have known I’d be here.” Ouch. I’m thinking that would have stung Mary, if she knew she hadn’t told him yet about who he was. Ouch too for Joseph, a devoted and loving father cast aside so quickly and, it would seem, somewhat heartlessly. No wonder the text records that Mary and Joseph did not understand his response. I’m sure they didn’t.

Whether he knew or didn’t about how and why he had been born, those words to his parents were sharp and cold. When Mary and Joseph were already so frightened that something bad had happened to him, it must have felt like a slap across the face. This is where we need to remember that Jesus was still a child, and an

adolescent at that. Sparing mom and dad's feelings would not have been front of mind for him in this moment. The entire world of his faith and his destiny was becoming clear to him and he was overwhelmed. He couldn't be worried about his parents in that moment. He was just trying to process it all. No doubt this is why this story ends quickly after this scene. He leaves and returns to Nazareth with them. Once there the text tells us he "increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor." Also, Luke tells us quite intentionally that Mary his mother "treasured all these things in her heart." Of course she does. Any mother would keep such an unforgettable and unnerving experience in her heart! But let's remember dear ones, that we have heard this phrase about Mary before. She had another incredible experience which she was already treasuring in her heart. It happened on the night Jesus was born when shepherds showed up to see the baby and telling her and Joseph about the message they had received from the angels. And what was that message? "Do not be afraid! I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people! To you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior who is the Messiah, the Lord." Wow. Of course these words were still in her heart, but time and real life had pushed them into the background. To her, Jesus had become just her little boy.

I am drawn to Mary in this story – no surprise there – because it is easy for me to imagine that by this time, her little family has become a lovely and wonderful one. She has a son, and additional children by this time which we know from other sources. She has a husband who loves and provides for them all. They have a home and food to eat and enough resources to travel to Jerusalem for the Passover, no inexpensive experience that! It is understandable that the long ago night of Jesus' birth is just a faint memory, pushed to the edges of her mind and heart as it is

filled up each day with love and life. Jesus was her boy, her beloved son. She knew he was very bright. She knew he was responsible and loving and kind. That's why she and Joseph became so afraid when they couldn't find him. That's why she asked why he had done such a thing as to run away from them.

That's when Jesus reminded her, he wasn't running away from them. He was running to who he had been born to be. He was running back to the God who had given him life. In this moment, the old memories of angels singing and shepherds telling collided head on with the 12 year old boy now sitting in the Temple with the religious leaders. Here was a new memory to treasure even as it was a reminder that her son was not ordinary. He never had been. He never would be. I think Mary had actually forgotten that for a little while, wrapped up as she was just in being his mother each day. Now, suddenly, she remembered who he was and who had been born to be. And, that dear ones, had to be a jarring moment, especially if she also remembered the words Simeon had spoken to her when they presented him in the Temple for circumcision shortly after his birth 12 years earlier. "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ... and a sword will pierce your own soul too." A sword will pierce your own soul too. I'm sure Mary was also remembering these words in this moment but not as treasures. No, these words were a warning of what was to come for Jesus, and for her. I'm thinking the long walk home to Nazareth after this little interlude in the Temple was a somber and quiet one. So much to process, to treasure, to wonder about.

This, dear ones, felt like the perfect story for us to reflect on this Scholarship Sunday when we mark the transition from youth to young adulthood. The Barbara Murano scholarships given in memory of a beloved friend and teacher long dead, help our own

kids to embark on their respective journeys into the future God has in mind for them. We are so blessed by all the young people whom we have assisted over the years, as they have shared with us their hopes and dreams for the future. These messages are always so inspiring, so poignant to us older folks! Their words invite us into imagining along with them what the world might become as they make their way into the futures stretching out before them. What amazing adventures await? What possibilities unimagined might be waiting? The sky is the limit, or so it seems. To them. To our children. To our youth and young adults.

But us, we're more like Mary. Watching them head off to school or to a gap year adventure or to a background role in a movie or a stage manager gig in a local theater company or to take bird inventories on remote islands or to ... Well, you get the picture. These are our kids, from our own church family. We've helped to raise them, more or less. We've celebrated their successes and prayed for their illnesses and their guidance. But, now, it's time to let them go. It's time to gather up all those treasured memories in our hearts of these kids, of our own kids, of our nieces and nephews, of our students and the kids we've mentored. It's time to store all those precious memories in our hearts so we can send them all off into the future God has in mind for them, trusting whole heartedly in the words of Jeremiah 29:11 – “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”

Okay God. Here they are. We've done our best. We entrust them to you, and we entrust our own selves to you too. Bless us all with a future filled with hope. That's all we ask. We confess that some days this feels like a big ask, but still. In the midst of it all we take you at your word, that with you, all things are possible. Thanks be to God. Always. Amen.