

CHILD, WHY HAVE YOU TREATED US LIKE THIS?

LUKE 2:41-52; COLOSSIANS 3:12-17

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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DECEMBER 27, 2015/FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

We have arrived at the last Sunday of 2015.

For some, Christmas festivities have come and gone. Others look forward to a few more days of celebrations.

Every year around this time—between the frenetic activity of Christmas and the looming New Year—I start to ask myself, “Well, another Christmas is on the way out... What was *that* all about?”

What’s the point of it all? What does it *mean* as we head out into 2016?

This morning, I want to frame my reflections on these and other matters around a question.

The question is asked by Mary when they discover Jesus in the temple after they had spent the past three days looking for him.

Child, why have you treated us like this?

We’ve heard the story of the 12-year-old Jesus of Nazareth lingering in the Jerusalem temple long after his parents and the rest of his family had begun their journey back home after Passover celebrations.

It’s easy to wonder what on earth Mary and Joseph were thinking! How could they just not notice that their son was gone for a whole day?!

But there was a deeply communal nature about much first century Jewish life that is mostly foreign to us today. Travel to and from Jerusalem for Passover would have been a massive group undertaking involving many people—friends, family, villages.

It would have been kind of like a big traveling party, with kids roaming to and fro, sometimes with this group of people, sometimes with that one. So it's not out of the question that it would take Jesus' parents a day to notice Jesus' absence.

But every parent knows what Mary and Joseph would have been feeling in this scene. There are few prospects more horrifying than the thought of losing a child.

And once the relief at discovering a lost child sets in, parents' thoughts often turn to rebuke.

How could you be so thoughtless?! How could you not think of us?!

Child, why have you treated us like this?

This text is a good one for the Sunday after Christmas. It offers a reminder about who this child was and would become and why.

Christmas scenes of mangers and shepherds and wise men are not too far in our rearview mirrors when we are thrust into this text where we see Jesus establishing a bit of a pattern.

This will not be the last time that Jesus treats people in ways they don't expect.

This week, I did a quick tour through the pages of Luke's gospel that follow this text:

- Luke 4:14-30 – the people in the synagogue are furious with Jesus for claiming that the Spirit of the Lord had anointed him to proclaim good news to the *Gentiles*
- Luke 5:27-32 – Jesus angers the Pharisees and teachers of the law by eating with tax collectors
- Luke 6:24-26 – Jesus further irritates the rich and the powerful by following up his famous beatitudes with the “woe to you!” section! *Woe to you who are rich... well fed... who laugh... whom people speak well of you!*

- Luke 7:36-50 – Jesus is anointed by a “sinful woman” – ends the conversation with his interrogators by pronouncing the woman’s “sins forgiven,” something only God could do. **Blasphemy!**
- Luke 8:19-21 – Jesus seems to have little use for family sentimentality! After being told that his mothers and brothers were waiting for him outside of the crushing crowds... “My mothers and brothers are those who hear God’s word and put it into practice”
- Luke 9:21-27 – Jesus starts to talk about suffering and dying (right after Peter declares that he is the Messiah!)
- Luke 12:49-53 – Jesus tells his disciples that he hasn’t come to bring peace but division
- Luke 14:25-27 – Jesus says whoever does take up your cross and follow him cannot be his disciple
- Luke 18:18-30 – Jesus declares that the rich cannot enter the kingdom of heaven

And then, of course, at the end of the story Jesus goes and dies like a common criminal, crushing the hopes of his people, confounding all who thought they understood who he was and what he was about.

In each of these examples (and others I haven’t mentioned), Jesus exhibits this uncomfortable tendency to refuse to say and do and *be* the Messiah that people wanted or expected.

We are reminded, on this first Sunday after Christmas, that this baby of idyllic Christmas manger scenes will ruffle a lot of feathers.

He will provoke and unsettle. He will confuse and disorient. He will enrage and frustrate expectations.

He will not dance to the people’s tune.

Mary’s question of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple will be echoed in different ways by different people throughout Jesus’ life.

Child, why have you treated us this way?

And we ask it in our own ways, all these years later, don’t we?

We celebrate the birth of Jesus each year. Each year Jesus takes his place amidst the lights and the tinsel and the songs of the season, amidst the laughing and feasting and parties and presents.

And then, a new year begins. And we are reminded that this baby in the manger doesn't always perform how we would like him to.

Jesus does not nicely align himself with our preferred ways of looking at the world, will not be domesticated in the services of this or that specific political agenda.

Jesus asks hard things of us – asks us to make room for the stranger, to die to self, to love enemies and forgive seventy times seven.

At times, we long for an easier Saviour.

At times we, too, ask the question, *Child, why have you treated us like this?*

Why have you not been God with us in the way that we want and expect? Why have you not made this life of faith easier? Why does your kingdom refuse to come, on earth as it is in heaven?

Why have all our sad divisions not ceased?

Why has death's dark shadow not yet been put to flight?

Why do the hopes and fears of all the years seem still to dominate the landscape of our hearts and minds?

How could you entrust the *church*—of all things! The church full of selfish and broken people who so often get things wrong...—with the task of representing you to the world?!

Why, child, have you not come to be *God with us* in the ways that we would prefer—why have you not vanquished the darkness in a display of force and strength?

Why do you insist upon such an unimpressive and unobtrusive manner of being with your people?

Why do you stubbornly insist that part of what it means for us to be ready for newness is to become different kinds of people who are part of the means by which peace comes?

Child, why have you treated us like this?

No, Jesus has rarely treated people how they expect him to.

But while this can be uncomfortable and inconvenient, it is very good news.

Because the stories I shared above aren't the only ones we could look at, are they?

We could also look at Jesus treating people in unexpectedly liberating and compassionate ways.

We could point to lepers being healed or at sinners receiving pardon. We could look at a woman about to be stoned for adultery by righteous religious men and Jesus getting in the way.

We could look at dead girls being raised from the dead.

We could look at stories about lost coins and lost sons, about Samaritans bandaging wounds on the side of the road.

We could look at Jesus restoring the ear of his a Roman soldier after one of his disciples had sliced it off in an attempt to defend him.

We could look at Jesus saying, "Father, forgive them, they don't know what they are doing..."

We could look at Jesus promising a thief on a cross that he would be with him in paradise.

We could look at the overall shape of a life given over to expressing love to the lowly, freedom to the captive, release for the prisoner, and hope to the hopeless.

We could look to a life saturated by grace at every turn.

I haven't documented these claims with chapter and verse, but we know these things to be true of Jesus, don't we?

We know this in our bones—particularly those of us who have kept company with Jesus for many long years.

We know that while this child will treat us in uncomfortable ways, while this child will demand things of us that seem impossible (love your enemies?!), while this child will insist on redeeming the world from *beneath* and *within* rather than from *above*, that **this child will treat us far better than we deserve.**

Few passages in the New Testament convey this as succinctly as Romans 5:7-8:

Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. ***But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.***

Yes, this child will treat us far better than we deserve.

And this, ultimately, is what Christmas is all about. The child who treats us with love invites us to walk out into a new year and to treat one another the same.

This is the point.

To give love, to receive love, to share the love of God with all we meet. To bear witness to the life-giving truth that the love of God has come near in this child, and to embody this love in our relationships.

Which finally brings us to our text from Colossians. It is a simple text, not at all difficult to understand however difficult it is to put into practice. We are to “put on the clothes of Jesus Christ”:

- compassion
- kindness
- humility
- meekness

- patience

These words, these behaviours, these dispositions are to govern our lives, our interactions with our fellow Christians and everyone else we rub shoulders with week in and week out.

We are to “bear with one another” and “forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven us.”

Above all—above *all...* in other words, at the top of the list, the most important thing, the most absolutely crucial thing that we need to remember...

“clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

Put on these clothes, Paul says, and the result will be harmony.

Not a life free of suffering, not an easy life by any means, but a life that is convinced that how we treat one another is deeply tied to how we have been treated by God in Christ.

Because if you look at that list of the clothes we are supposed to “put on,” we realize of course that this is exactly how Christ has treated us.

Each one of those words that Paul said should characterize the behaviour of the church in Colossae describes how Jesus has treated us.

- compassion
- kindness
- humility
- meekness
- patience

This is how Jesus treated us. This is how he treats us still.

And this is how we are to treat one another.

A new calendar year stands before us. It is a year that will contain many challenges and obstacles. It is a year that, for some, will contain suffering and trial. It is a year that will yield joy and fulfillment, and opportunities for participating in what brings life and light.

It is a year that will also bring temptations to settle for lesser stories than the story of Christmas.

Sometimes, the world will seem futile, hopeless, meaningless... Sometimes, it will not be easy to believe that love is the reason for this whole story we are a part of.

Sometimes it will be all too easy to look at the child in the manger and think, *why couldn't you have set things up differently? Why is there still suffering in the world? Why is doubt easier than faith and fear easier than love?*

It is at these times that we most need this reminder of how we have ultimately been treated by God in Christ.

We have been given an example of what a human life is supposed to look like.

We have been forgiven, healed, and set out on the path to freedom.

We have been invited to participate with God in the restoration of all things.

We have been given a light and a life like no other, and trusted to represent these to a watching world.

We have been loved.

The Christmas season is as good a time of year as any to be reminded of these things.

And if we keep these things before us, Mary's question—*Child, why have you treated us like this?*—begins to shift from a frustrated complaint at what we imagine to be the inadequate and unsettling manner of God's coming to be with us to an expression of reverent worship.

Child, how could you treat us with such love, such humility, such grace and mercy, such patience, such fierce determination to drag us from darkness to light and to rescue us from bondage to fear and sin and death?

This is the hope that the child in the manger holds out to each one of us this Christmas season.

This child will not always treat us in ways expected or desired; but this child will *always* treat us in ways that address our deepest need.

Thanks be to God.

