

I love the last line of this morning's text: *And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.*

Increasing in wisdom and increasing in years don't always go together. All of us know plenty of folk whose chronological span far exceeds their wisdom quotient. In any case, this verse got me to thinking this week about what the biblical writer meant when he said that Jesus increased in wisdom.

For some, the notion that Jesus was not omniscient from the beginning might be a bit of a stumbling block. Some of us have fragments of Sunday school discussions lingering in the corners of our brains in which we talked about whether Jesus had divine foreknowledge about what was going to happen to him. This question is an extension of the debate around the meaning of his divinity.

Yet, I suspect that most of us are comfortable with the idea that Jesus was fully human, just as we are. We do not understand him as some kind of superhero with special powers and abilities. His divinity for us has much more to do with his total surrender to God than it does with super-human powers. We accept that Jesus was born into this world innocent and ignorant, like the rest of us. We believe what the writer is saying when he tells us that Jesus grew in wisdom as the years went by, not the notion that he knew everything there was to know from the moment of his birth.

But more to the point, what is the nature of that wisdom of which Luke writes?

Well, in the story that we have before us we see the boy Jesus in the temple engaged in dialogue with the teachers. He has decided to remain in Jerusalem on his own after his parents have completed their Passover obligations and set out to

return to Nazareth. In his mind, and in the understanding of Judaism, he is on the verge of manhood. He is almost 13, the age of majority. Soon he will be counted as a member of the minyan, the ten men needed to convene an official Jewish prayer service, and so he is preparing for this significant responsibility.

An important quality we see in the emerging wisdom of Jesus is that he was serious about his faith. He hungered and thirsted for understanding and dedicated himself to learning all he could from those who had spent lifetimes immersed in the study of Judaism.

I knew a young man many years ago who, at the age of 19, was convinced that he knew everything that he needed to know in life. His parents tried to convince him to stay in college, but he just didn't see the point. He was smarter, wiser and more knowledgeable than the frauds who were trying to teach him, he claimed. I don't know what ever became of Tim, but the last I heard, he had taken his father's credit card and car (without permission) and set off on a cross country journey. The

police had been notified. Without knowing for sure, I would venture to guess that Tim learned a few things about life as the result of that experience that he hadn't known before.

Knowing how much we don't know is one of the marks of wisdom.

A second hint that we get about the nature of the wisdom of Jesus is found just a few verses earlier in the passage. It says that after his distressed parents found Jesus in the temple "*he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was obedient to them.*" Again, there is a kind of humility and respect for relationship that we see in Jesus as a young man. I want to suggest to you that wisdom, an attribute that is quite distinct from knowledge, has a great deal to do with that quality of respect.

Respect is about appreciating and honoring our relationships—relationships with family, with friends, with the world around us and, ultimately, with God.

I'm not talking here about externally imposed deference to authority

figures, but, rather, about an inner inclination towards reverence. Respect, as we see it lived out in the life of Jesus, was not about submission to cultural norms, but cut through the social stratification of his day. He lifted up the poor, ate with sinners, touched lepers and honored women.

I suspect that the choice of Jesus to be obedient to his parents grew out of a right-sized notion of who he was in this world.

So, a second mark of wisdom is that it is grounded in respect for the sacred worth of all people.

The final mark of wisdom that I want to speak of today is that true wisdom is a journey and not a destination. It is a process that spans a lifetime. It is a way of living and not an achievement of some goal.

The phone rang at 2 a.m. on a Friday morning. Folks seldom call at that hour to share good news, and this call followed form. My father had been rushed to the hospital with internal bleeding. I got dressed and into the car and headed west to Concord,

Massachusetts, to be with him. My dad was 86 at the time and had Alzheimer's Disease and I knew he would be afraid if he were there alone. He also needed someone to tell the doctors that they needed to call him "Bill" if they wanted him to listen to them and not William or Mr. Campbell. Never mind Rev. Campbell. No one there would know him as a United Methodist minister.

As the night wore on, the news was not good. His vital signs were dropping and his blood levels were dangerously low. The doctor on call came to me to describe what they thought was happening. His bleeding was of unknown origin. They could do an invasive procedure to try to determine the source and then, possibly, could do surgery to repair it. I told them that I did not believe that this is what my father would want if he were able to make such a decision. I asked about other alternatives. The doctor told me that they could give him fluids and some blood and see what happened. Sometimes the body will right itself in such circumstances. The decision was made. They would admit him to the hospital, but would not put him in

the ICU or attempt any high-tech interventions.

Throughout the day on Friday our family kept vigil at his bedside. He was weak and his breathing was labored. Occasionally he would try to tell us something, but his voice was inaudible and the words were slurred. Mostly he just slept.

I took my mother home at supper time and the other family members departed soon after. When I returned to the hospital I was alone with him. Surprisingly, he was awake and seemed to have new energy, probably from the two units of blood he had received that afternoon. But he was also able to speak more clearly and more audibly than he had in many months. Suddenly, he did something very strange and very wonderful.

He was imagining that he was back in his pulpit and he began to preach. The phrases were not always complete sentences, but they hung together. He spoke about life as a good gift from God and how fortunate we are to know such love in our lives. And then he said this:

We are Christians. That means we are people who have decided to take a chance on Jesus Christ. We don't have any guarantees. That's why they call it faith. But I can tell you this...he has never let me down.

And then he began to pray. The words were a little topsy-turvy, prayer phrases fused from various pieces of liturgy, but their sense was adoration and gratitude. He prayed aloud for about a minute or so, and then, following his gentle amen, he drifted back into that quieter more internal place where he had been much of the day.

My dad died a little over a year later and never again was able to gather the kind of clarity he had in those sacred moments I witnessed that night. I share this story with you this morning because I believe that my dad had internalized a kind of wisdom that nothing could dislodge. His dying over several years was hard. I cannot pretend otherwise. But on that Friday night, I saw something that the ravages of a terrible disease had been unable to eradicate. The illness had been impotent against my father's faith. Satan was sent packing and the wild beasts were held at bay,

if only for a time. His faith, sorely tested, had proved true in the crucible.

The wisdom of Jesus is marked by love that cannot be contained in this life, but pours itself extravagantly over the edges of existence and fills the cup of eternity. When God looks upon a life that has been well and wisely lived, God sees not the emptiness of the end, but the vast givenness of all that has been.

The wisdom of Jesus is humble. It is grounded in respect. And it is all about how we love rather than what we know. When everything else is stripped away, love remains.

*What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a
lamb,
If I were a Wise Man, I would do my
part;
Yet what I can I give him: give my
heart.*

Amen.