

Luke 2:41-52

The *Washington Post* published a wonderful story last week about the staff of a retirement home in DC whose children have been suffering through remote learning since March. One of the CNAs, who doesn't speak English fluently, was frustrated because she couldn't help her 12 and 14 year-old sons at home. The independent living coordinator at the community decided to ask residents if they'd tutor kids on Zoom, and as you might imagine, the response was enormous. This CNA's 12 year-old got paired with a 78 year-old French teacher, Mrs. Sawtelle. She "talks with Gonzalo about Neil deGrasse Tyson and Ruth Bader Ginsburg. The normally shy Gonzalo has been eager and enthusiastic with Sawtelle, his mother said. It might help that she can bring a personal touch to some of their discussions about public figures; her son-in-law clerked under Ginsburg, and once, when she was a child, she met Albert Einstein.

"I had a great uncle who was a professor at Princeton, and we were visiting. We spotted a man walking along with a little white poodle, and my uncle said, 'Go chat with that man,' and so I did, and later I learned it was Albert Einstein," she said. Gonzalo told her that he would have liked to meet Einstein, too."ⁱ

A 10th grader named Cameron was also struggling. He'd been an okay student but his passion was basketball, and now he can't play. So Marna Tucker, a 79 year-old lawyer, began to meet with Cameron by Zoom.

In their initial video call, his mother recalled, Tucker put academics aside and asked Cameron about himself: what he liked, what he was good at. "She said, 'Let's get to know you here. We're going to get to know each other first, and then I'll help you.'"

She told Cameron about herself: In 1984, she was the first female president of the D.C. Bar. Her husband of 47 years is a retired federal judge, her daughter is the mayor of Chevy Chase, Md., and her son is a filmmaker in Los Angeles.

“She’s a very successful lady,” he said. “She’s teaching me other ways, how to write different ways. . . . She’s taught me ideas and organizing my words, and she showed me how to make my sentences make more sense. I have an A in English. I usually got like a B.”

[His mom] says Cameron has opened up more since working with Tucker. “It reflects in his grades; it reflects in his insight,” she said. “He can now respond to people he’s never seen before. . . . She made him so much more comfortable. They would have long conversations. I would come home and say, ‘Who are you talking to?’ and he’d say, ‘Ms. Tucker!’ It was a tutoring for my son, but also a mentoring.”

The story of retirees bonding with their staff’s students suggests to me how much fun the scholars in the Temple must have been having with Jesus. Mary and Joseph had a terrifying ordeal wondering where their boy was, and imagining for days all the awful things that could be happening while he was missing. But the wonderful part of the story is its centerpiece, the image of Jewish scholars doing what they do and opening up the circle to include an inquisitive 12 year-old. “Learning,” in Judaism, is not the receptive pole whose opposite, active end is “teaching.” “Learning” is what scholars do together when they read and discuss and argue about texts and ideas. These scholars were serious intellectuals, and learning was their lifeblood. But they pulled up another chair for the kid, and they listened to him and conversed with him—and they had the grace to appreciate the astonishing insights he brought.

Luke definitely wants to continue showing us what an observant Jewish family Joseph and Mary are. Their trip to Jerusalem for Passover is consistent with their effort to get to the Temple for Mary’s purification and the dedication of the infant Jesus. Jesus may be from a little town in the middle of nowhere, but his folks are raising him right, raising him just as piously as any little boy who lives in Jerusalem itself. But also, notice, the scholars in the Temple are

doing their part too. We and Luke's first audience know very well how corrupt and powerful the Temple was under Roman rule; we know that the next time Jesus would come to the Temple, it would be to upset the moneychangers' tables and provoke the lethal reaction of the priests and the Roman authorities. Throughout Jesus' adulthood the Temple, or the religious establishment, is poison. Jesus and his followers stand in opposition to the Vichy Jews who hang on to privilege by allowing the Temple to operate as an arm of Roman colonialism. Yet here in his boyhood, Jesus is perfectly comfortable and happy in the Temple, learning with the scholars and apparently being fed and sheltered by these same rabbis. And you know why?

Because despite corruption and cooptation, the Temple is also attended by good and decent people who love God and love learning, and they are the beating heart of Judaism. *Of course* the boy Jesus would find a welcome here among his elders, kindred spirits. There is a special joy in studying with a young person, as many of us know. That's why those people at Ingleside at Rock Creek jumped at the chance to support staff children with their schooling. It's fun to see a kid's eyes light up with discovery, and it's even more fun when their questions or their perspective lead *us* to a new discovery. I had a Vietnamese Buddhist student once in my world religions class who wrote a paper on some of Jesus' parables, and it was the best thing ever. She was so insightful, and her insights were completely uncontaminated by conventional wisdom or social conditioning. I deeply regret that I didn't keep a copy!

But I imagine that while the scholars in the Temple were loving the fresh perspective that Jesus brought to their studies, he was also taking in their methods of critical thinking and analysis, their application of the prophets' wisdom to current situations, their willingness to question authority. Consciously or not, they were implanting in him the seeds of the faith that

would lead him to symbolically destroy the Temple for its corruption as an adult. In a way, the Temple was doing what the Temple should do: preparing the next generation to survive and thrive by kicking over the rotting walls that no longer served them or God.

Marna Tucker, the lawyer whose tutoring helped her student get an A in English, was thrilled when she heard about it. She said, “We all like to help, but we don’t all get to see what happens when you cast your bread upon the waters.” Which is true, and also an understatement. I bet none of those scholars in the Temple had an inkling of the ripple effects of their including the kid in discussion for those three days. They just loved *having* a fresh inquiring mind among them, and they couldn’t anticipate that they were contributing to the intellectual formation of a rabbi who would change the world.

Luke says that Mary pondered all these things in her heart. That was astute of her, because more often, we don’t recognize at the time the roots or seeds of what one day becomes extraordinary and amazing. But what felt to her and Joseph like a mishap of adolescence, to Jesus was a window that opened up to a huge, bright world of inquiry and challenges. What felt to the scholars like a fun couple of days, to Jesus was an affirmation that grounding himself in his religious tradition would eventually give him wings to fly. What looks to the residents of Ingleside at Rock Creek like an enjoyable exchange with the children of their staff members, who knows—maybe it will save someone’s life, or launch someone on their own mission to change the world, or unlock boundless delight. We *should* cast our bread upon the waters, even though we’ll never see how it ends up, because God does amazing things with whatever we offer with love.

God of all learning,
When the boy, Jesus, stayed in the temple to learn from the elders, it was the elders who in turn

learned from him. Teach us, Lord, as you have taught others, and grant us wisdom and willingness to learn. Amen.

ⁱ https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/social-issues/ingleside-covid-mentor-staff/2020/12/27/114b7e06-448e-11eb-a277-49a6d1f9dff1_story.html