

Here are GREAT TRUTHS THAT LITTLE CHILDREN HAVE LEARNED:

- 1) No matter how hard you try, you can't baptize cats.
- 2) When your Mom is mad at your Dad, don't let her brush your hair.
- 3) If your sister hits you, don't hit her back. They always catch the second person.
- 4) You can't trust dogs to watch your food.
- 5) The best place to be when you're sad is Grandma's lap.

And GREAT TRUTHS THAT ADULTS HAVE LEARNED:

- 1) Raising teenagers is like nailing jello to the wall.
- 2) Families are like fudge – mostly sweet, with a few nuts.
- 3) Laughing is good exercise. It's like jogging on the inside.
- 4) Wrinkles don't hurt.
- 5) Middle age is when you choose your cereal for the fiber, not the toy....

This Sunday's gospel begins by discussing Jesus' parents, Mary and Joseph, what they're doing, and where they are going. It ends by noting what they are thinking. Even though Mary has given birth to Jesus, even His own mother has difficulty figuring Him out.

Luke says that Mary and Joseph go to the temple every year to observe the Passover. This was way beyond what the average Jew did – going to Jerusalem once in a lifetime to celebrate the Passover was the dream of most observant Jews. Jesus' family are presented as faithful Jews, knowledgeable about and active in the rituals and practices of their faith. Luke thus grounds anything he will say about Jesus and His future ministry in the faith of His ancestors. Luke wants us to keep this Jewish grounding of Jesus in mind as we witness Him moving into His ministry. He will have much conflict with the Jewish authorities. Still, any conflict He has is not with Judaism itself but rather with their conflicting interpretations of the historic faith of Israel. From the first, even from His childhood, Jesus is portrayed as thoroughly knowledgeable and grounded in the faith of Abraham and Sarah and their descendants.

The only account we have of Jesus' childhood is provided by Luke, and our first glimpse of the growing child Jesus shows Him set clearly in the context of the faith of Israel, in the Temple no less, and already there are tensions. People don't know what to make of Him. From His earliest years, Jesus befuddled people and didn't behave as they expected.

Mary and Joseph's leaving Jesus behind at the Temple is not meant to be Luke's example of bad parenting. Rather, this gives Luke the opportunity to assert that the boy Jesus is a very special sort of child with a particular relationship with God, whom He refers to, in the very first words we hear Jesus speak, as 'my Father.'

Luke presents Jesus as fully human (a child with parents, someone who grows and develops as we do) and fully God (He possesses unique insight into the things of God as we do not). Luke's focus is upon the parents of Jesus and their reactions to His actions and words. Jesus is a typical growing boy, but He is more -- and the more is baffling to them.

At Christmas we celebrated the birth of Jesus, welcoming Him as Emmanuel, God with us. This Feast of the Holy Family, we note that Jesus may be God with us, but not as we – or even Mary and Joseph – expected.

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So if we are not sure what to make of Christ, if we are not absolutely clear on His meaning for our life, then we should take heart – even Jesus’ parents didn’t know what to make of the child who was born to them – and to us. (adapted from Will Willimon in PULPIT RESOURCE, THINKING ABOUT JESUS, 29 December 2024, p. 39)

Second, so what does all of this have to do with us? The Holy Family functions as an icon for us. An icon is an image – pointing to or showing something of the divine. Perhaps the most famous icon is that which contains Mary, Joseph and the Child Jesus. It captures the full reality of Jesus – subject to parents, but the halo which is usually depicted over His head reminds us that He is more than just any child, He is God. And the gospels tell us that this child grew up to be the most famous person in all of human history – the Christ, the Son of God. And even the most cursory read of His life tells us that He was an unusually wonderful, full human being, confident because of His deep realization that He was the Beloved Son of His heavenly Father. In all of this, He is the model for a fully integrated and healthy, holy adult. But it is important to note that AS A CHILD, Jesus is CARRIED by his parents. This is an important part of the image.

Today too many things tempt us away from this and invite us instead to remain always a child, an adolescent. How can I say this?

Because so much in our world today is telling us: “Don’t grow up! Don’t be a mother or a father or a grandparent or an elder. Don’t take on the responsibility that comes with adulthood. Remain instead the puer or the puella, the eternal boy or the eternal girl. Keep forever a youthful body and an untethered spirit. Have no irrevocable commitments or binding responsibilities. Assume neither the body nor the duties of an adult!”

This is the air we breathe. More and more the ideal of a woman is Tinkerbell and the ideal of a man is Peter Pan, adolescent figures swinging through the sky, youthful, slim, free. Hollywood’s leading men and women are made to look younger and younger, the fashion industry dictates that there are to be no middle-aged bodies, and men and women old enough to be grandparents want still to look as if they’re twenty. BOTOX sales are through the roof, leaving plastic looking faces with a perpetually surprised look. To me, it’s not at all attractive, but whether or not we find plastic faces attractive, what’s really wrong with this?

What’s wrong is that Peter Pan and Tinkerbell are children. Neither has ever carried anything or anyone, nor made a commitment or assumed responsibility. No wonder they’ve no stretch-marks, no wrinkles, no bodies stooped from carrying burdens, no middle-aged fat, no gray hair, and precious little anxiety about the brokenness of our world. They’re children and children are not yet scarred by the burden of having to carry things.

Robert Bly, in his insightful work, THE SIBLING SOCIETY, suggests that what is lacking in our culture are parents and elders. Nobody wants to assume those roles because to assume them is to admit we’re no longer children ourselves and we don’t want to do that. Instead, too often, a mom wants to be her daughter’s best friend rather than the parent her daughter desperately needs and a dad wants to be his son’s buddy rather than the father that his son really wants. As adults we want to be perceived as cool rather than as parental, as free rather than responsible. What this does, more often than not, is put us in unconscious competition with the young rather than make us their mentors.

Third, the effects of this are everywhere. We see it in the cult we’ve developed around the body – the pressure to look young, to not show the effects of aging, to value physical looks above all else. Partly this is good. It’s made us more sensitive both to our health and our looks; a good thing in itself, aesthetically and

morally. There's something healthy about wanting to look good for, as we know, the first sign of clinical depression is when we no longer care about our appearance. But this has a debilitating underside as well. What all this pressure to remain young and look attractive does, is make it very difficult for us to accept aging and mortality and all that come with it.

And part of what comes with it is the pressure to never grow up, to never really mature, to remain forever the child, the adolescent, someone who looks over his or her shoulder for some adult to summon or blame. Too often our attitude mimics that of children and adolescents, seen particularly in our victim culture. When a child is caught in a situation where something's gone wrong, invariably their response is "It's not my fault!" "This has nothing to do with me!" "Mom and dad have a problem." "Someone needs to fix this!"

Notice how little different this sounds from: "Our leaders are evil!" "The culture's a mess!" "The church needs to straighten itself out!" "I'm not going to give to the church – somebody else can do that – I'm going shopping!" Bottom-line, these are the phrases of children and adolescents: "Something's broken, but it's not my fault; it's not my responsibility to try to help fix it."

Taking responsibility and trying to help carry things is one of the primary tasks of adulthood and stepping forth to do this is one of the litmus-tests of maturity. As mothers and fathers, we're supposed to be carrying the children, not asking to be carried ourselves.

But to do so will scar us in a way that will set us apart from the young. We'll have stretch-marks, bent bodies, anxious hearts, the stoop that comes with carrying burdens, gray hair, wrinkles induced by worry, and probably some middle-aged fat as well. Moreover, we won't always be best-buddies to our children or the coolest mom or dad on the planet, but we will be the elders, the mentors, the teachers, the adults, the parents, the moms and the dads that our society so sorely needs. So may it be for us. AMEN. (last 2 points adapted from Ronald Rolheiser, FROM ASKING TO BE CARRIED TO HELPING CARRY, posting of 15 June 2003)