

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Barbara R. Cunningham, associate minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, December 27, 2009, dedicated to the glory of God!

“A Piece of the Whole Story”

Luke 2:41-52

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Our scripture today is the one brief story of Jesus in between his birth and his adult years. Even then he was teaching lessons. Yet, if one of our children did that, I imagine that child would have some lessons coming. Again, as last week, we imagine Mary as a mom, her feelings when she couldn't find her son! The fear and anger at the same time came over her, I'm sure. And there must have been so much relief before she asks, "Why did you do this to us?"

Jesus grows up so fast in our lectionary that I find it hard to focus one thing about his life. But today I'll share with you what I believe the legacy of the Christ child becomes for us.

We have learned so much since the birth of the Christ. Of what importance is this miracle when we have created computer chips that do everything, cars that have everything from movies to maps in them, and we even created space travel and a space station. Life is so different, and we know so much more about our bodies, and diseases, and health. The importance (as you already know) is the simple message of the Christ – human and divine – that came to earth. Who is this Jesus?

Jesus was born into a very different world. We know little about him except for three brief years at the end of his life. Some of his teachings are still beyond our comprehension, written so long after his death. Yet, he moves like a giant across the backdrop of 20 centuries of human history. Let me explore with you the legacy that he left.

Here is a person who was born in a manger (really a cave). How many of you have been to Israel. There is a cave under a prominent Catholic church that they claim to be Jesus' place of birth. Jesus was the child of peasant parents. He lived the first 30 years of his life in the obscure and provincial little village of Nazareth. The extent of his public activity was two or three years.

To our knowledge not one word of what he had to say was written down in his lifetime. He never went to college. He never traveled more than 200 miles from the place where he was born. He never did any of the things that we usually assume one must do in order to attain greatness. He had no credentials but himself.

While he was still a young man, the tide of public opinion turned against him. He was betrayed by an intimate friend. He was condemned by the church for heresy and by the state for treason. Along with two convicted criminals, he was executed in the cruelest manner then known to humankind. When he died, he left no set of doctrines, no system of rules, no laws or organization. When he breathed his last breath, he left nothing behind but the garments that he wore, for which his executioners gambled. His TANGIBLE legacy to the world was his brief life as a carpenter.

What about his INTANGIBLE legacy to the world? What was there about him that made him the central figure of the human race, and the person whose birth date has become the dividing mark for all time? What did he leave for us to use in an age like this, to help people like you and me? Does the legacy of Jesus have a word for us in our troubled times?

First of all, HE LEFT US HIS TEACHINGS. He taught with authority, and even his enemies marveled at what he said and wondered where he learned it. His words were simple; even the children could understand. As far as we can tell, there was no

system by which he taught (except we know he taught with the parables he told). He sensed the needs of people and spoke to those needs in terms they understood. None of his teachings were written for us by Jesus himself. He left no instructions for writing down his words or the record of his life. But much of what he said and did was so indelible stamped in the memory of those who were near him they could not forget.

Secondly, HE HAS LEFT US HIS LIFE AS A PERFECT EXAMPLE OF THE HIGHEST AND BEST THAT HUMANKIND CAN POSSIBLY ACHIEVE. We have our saints and scholars. We have seen brilliance and piety and successful living in many forms. But no person or combination of persons has rivaled his life as the greatest life ever lived. The greatness and the simplicity of the life of Jesus has always been a mystery to those who have studied and followed him. Theologically, we have tried to explain him by saying he is God and he is Man, but this does not nearly express the truth of his life.

Thirdly, HE HAS LEFT US THE BODY OF PEOPLE WE CALL THE CHURCH. Jesus gave only the concept, but we have organized it into its present form. No church can claim to be created by Jesus – it was the later concept of loyalty to Jesus' teachings that brought the body of believers together to form the church. He certainly showed us how to be a church: to share meals, to care for one another when sick, to celebrate the events of our lives together – in other words to love and be loved as the church.

Fourth, THE GREATEST OF ALL, WE ARE BLESSED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT, GIVEN TO COMFORT US, TO GUIDE US IN TRUTH. I don't believe he would have wanted us to use only the truth of his time on earth, but to learn to love in our time. Technology has evolved so fast, how can we stay in the past?

Let me share with you some feelings about the church as it is today. There are wonderful programs that have been created over the years. I go back 70 years in the church (I don't like bringing up my age), but I started out when I was a baby, like some of you. I grew up learning the ways of the church as it was in my small town, in a society very different from the city I live in now, or where I have

lived in the recent past. All I can do is give you an example of my life – you have to look at your own.

I was baptized by immersion in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) when I was six or seven. (I wasn't supposed to look out into the congregation, but I "needed" to see the people). We went to church every Sunday, and my friend Lois and I sang duets when we were very small, all through high school. We had very little, but we always helped others. I went to college, became a minister's wife, had children, went to work, then seminary and became a minister myself. I have designed many programs, led many workshops, gave new life to a lot of designated programs.

What I have learned is that I must give the reins to another, to someone with more energy, let new ideas come in. If I don't, the effort I believe the Christ wants me to give will have been wasted. When I knew this the most was when I decided to retire the first time. At First Community Church we had a staff of 34 persons, and one young man came back from a workshop so excited about what he had learned. He said it was a new concept and he was ready to teach it. As he described it, I realized I had taught that to others 30 years ago. Things cannot remain the same. Times change. What stays with us is the example of the love, peace and good will – the patience of the Christ, who told us about life.

What have we held on to from the time Jesus was born? I believe Jesus wants us to take his teachings of love and care for one another in each situation. He wants us not only to break the bread and drink the cup in a ritual here on Sunday morning, but to take the bread with us as we leave, to share the message of God's grace with everyone. He wants us to drink of the cup of the new covenant here, and then to embrace the world around us with an example of peace and justice.

We have his teachings to inform us, his life to guide us, his church to nurture us and the spirit to make us one. Our responsibility is to live our lives as if we understand this legacy. Amen.

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