

# Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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*May these words of my mouth and this meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our unending love and our peaceful home. Amen.*

Several weeks back, within these very pews actually, I heard a sermon that re-shaped the way I approached the Christmas season. It was Vicar Kornelius's sermon about the classic Christmas movie "The Grinch," perhaps some of you remember it. It was so rich and thought-provoking a sermon that it had me analyzing all of my favorite classic Christmas movies as I watched them this year and examining their theological implications. So, Vicar, thank you. And, if you ever wonder whether your sermons have any impact on people, consider this proof that they do.

Now, in keeping with this theme and this season, one of *my* all-time favorite films to watch around this time is "Home Alone." The beloved story of a young boy who gets left behind by his family as they travel to celebrate Christmas with relatives in France, who ends up having to defend his family home from would-be thieves in various imaginative and slapstick ways. It's a well-loved film for a reason as there are no shortages of memorable lines, visual gags, and stellar performances from the cast. And, I must admit, part of my affection for the film comes from the fact that it was one of the few VHS tapes that lived in the nursery of the church my Dad was the pastor of during my childhood, and I spent many an afternoon during my summer breaks watching Home Alone while my dad worked.

Why bring this movie up? Well, I could not help but think of this film while reading the gospel text for today and noticing a few similarities. Now, I'm not saying that the writers, directors, and producers of "Home Alone" found their inspiration in the second chapter of the gospel of Luke. But, I'm not *not* saying that, because it seems Jesus himself also had a home alone moment when he was 12 years old. As they did every year, the holy family traveled to Jerusalem for the festival of Passover, and when it was over they joined an entourage of travelers who were all heading back towards Nazareth but Jesus, gets left behind in Jerusalem. And, I'm sure this didn't happen but I love to imagine that, in the spirit of "Home Alone" Mary, the blessed mother of our Lord and Savior, also bolted upright and shouted JESUS when she realized he was no longer with the group of travelers.

Now, this is where the similarities between the two stories end. Because, Jesus was not defending his childhood home from 2 aspirational yet incompetent bandits. Rather, when Joseph and Mary did eventually find him, he was in the temple, sitting with the Rabbis, listening to them and asking them questions. And, we're told, everyone listening to him was astounded by what he was saying.

This is an important detail of the story, actually, and I want to focus in a little bit on why Jesus asking questions matters. When I was in my undergrad studies, I was fortunate enough to take a class on the Jewish religion taught by Dr. Murray Haar at Augustana College in Sioux Falls. Dr. Haar remains a renowned and respected voice in the world of theology and has a fascinating story of faith. He was born and raised Jewish, later converted to Lutheran Christianity, and then converted back to Judaism which is no easy process. But, one of the things he taught within this class that has

always stuck with me is the importance of questions and healthy doubt within any religion, but especially within Judaism.

In the rabbinic tradition, it is in the act of questioning that faith is found. And Dr. Haar would often tell the class “belief is not made into faith when one has all the right answers, instead, belief becomes faith when one starts to ask the right questions.” And this is evidenced by the traditional method of studying the Torah. When Rabbis study scripture, it is most often done in pairs, so that both individuals can engage in the necessary exchange of questions and ideas in order to draw out the truth contained within the words of the text.

And so, we have this image of Jesus, sitting in the temple with the Rabbis. But this is not just any temple, this is *the* temple in Jerusalem, the dwelling place of the most Holy of Holies, the one physical location on earth where it was believed that God made contact with this earth in order to keep it all from descending into disorder and chaos. It is *here*, that a 12 year old Jesus is asking questions to those who were well-read and well-studied such that they were astonished. In other words, Jesus was speaking and teaching truths that were so astounding that people were amazed not simply by the depth of his knowledge but also the depth of his faith.

Now, it's not lost on me that we hear this story in the midst of the Christmas season. Yes, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day have come and gone, but we are still within the 12 days where we reflect and focus on the miracle of God becoming human in the form of Jesus. And I find it remarkably fitting that we get this image of Jesus in Christmas. Not the image of an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-mighty savior who has all the right answers as droves of people bow down and worship him. But rather, a twelve year old

Jesus sitting among teachers and faithful alike, showing the truth of God through his questions and understanding.

This year, over the holiday season, my mind has been overflowing with questions. Honestly perhaps it's more truthful to call them anxieties. As I continue to observe the world we live in, the direction we are collectively headed, I cannot help but question. The incoming administration for our federal government continues to telegraph alarming beliefs and policies, AI and tech advancements continue to race past their own boundaries, seemingly beyond the point of usefulness, as their disastrous effects upon the environment only increase and worsen, homelessness grew by 18% this last year alone, a majority of Americans cannot afford a surprise trip to the hospital, the gap between the wealthiest oligarchs and the common laborer continued to grow even further, misinformation has poisoned our ability to challenge ideas and communicate, empathy seems like it's a resource that has run dry, and that's not even getting into the ongoing human rights crises in Gaza, the Congo, Sudan, and elsewhere.

Yes this Christmas season, my mind has been plagued by questions like "how can there be so much suffering in this world?" "Why are so many people so unwilling and so *scared* to imagine a world where all of us have enough?" "If we all live upon the same planet, why don't more people seem to care about our already rapidly changing climate?" "Why are all these people so terrified of other people living a healthy and comfortable life?"

And, in the midst of these questions, I have found myself returning to this undeniable truth: Love is an infinitely renewable resource. Even as we continue to watch unfathomable Crises unfold, we will not run out of love. Even as the stability of our own society may come into question, we will not

run out of love. Even as wars ravage communities, and hurricanes and other natural disasters devastate homes, and trans people are demonized, and immigrants are painted as enemies, and workers are exploited to create yet more wealth for the rich, we WILL NOT RUN OUT OF LOVE.

I can think of no more appropriate Christmas message this year, we are not alone, and love never runs out. No matter what comes to pass, it is my prayer that we as a community and as members of a shared faith never give up on the power of love, which truly does bind everything together in perfect harmony. And, may we always remember what the love of God looks like. Not some all-powerful divine conqueror scattering enemies away on the field of battle. But a child born to common people, who sat among them, teaching through questions, and who eventually gave the gift of God's unending love to all people. May we all be so emboldened in this season to love as we first were loved, because it never has and never will run out.

Beloveds, as we continue to move through this season of celebration and reflection on the miracle of God stepping into human life, may we never forget that it is the unending Peace and Love of God that sustains us, that we return home to time and time again. Through this peace, and especially through God's boundary-breaking, never-ending, radically-expansive love, may we rest assured that we are never alone in this life or the next. Thanks be to God, amen.