

LIVING WITH PASSIONATE CURIOSITY
(Lessons from Stage and Screen: Hidden Figures)
Luke 2: 41-52

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The United Church of Christ can trace part of its heritage back to the Puritans and Pilgrims, the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and what is known as the New England experiment. These early settlers had extremely high standards for their community. They expected their clergy to be well educated so they started a school called Harvard. Later they helped to start the nation's first coed college - Oberlin, the first college for native Americans - Dartmouth, the first school for the deaf - Gallaudet, and many other colleges and universities, including several specifically at the time for the African-American community. These are our ancestors in the faith, men and women who believed that there is no separation between the intellectual life and the spiritual life.

In other words, what we believe is that you should bring your mind and your questions to church. The most robust faith is the one that stands up to questions and debate, not the one that ignores questions or sweeps them under the rug. Jesus was a faithful Jew, who like all good Jews, knew that studying the scriptures was one way to understand God. He knew the laws well. The Pharisees and Sadducees were Jewish groups who held fast to their traditions. They were uncomfortable with Jesus' new approach to religion and they were constantly questioning him, sometimes honestly, and sometimes in an attempt to trick him into making a mistake, saying something wrong. One time they asked him, "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment?" Now maybe some of them genuinely wanted to know what Jesus would say, but most of them put it forth as a test. There were 613 commandments in the Hebrew scriptures. How could Jesus choose just one?

But Jesus responded with great wisdom, a knowledge that came from his mind and his heart: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Everything else follows from these two.

Love God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence. As Jesus did. It’s a great message for this Sunday before school starts for many of our students. The more we learn, the better we will be able to live in the world as disciples of Jesus. No knowledge is every wasted. Our world is complex and complicated. Faithfulness requires our whole selves, minds and hearts both fully engaged.

I often wish I knew more about what Jesus’ day to day life was really like, especially in those 30 years before he began his ministry. We have the story of his birth, and the story of his 3-year ministry, but we only have one story in between...he is twelve, a significant age. At 12, Jewish instruction for young men (unfortunately only young men at the time) became more intense. One scholar has researched Jewish customs in Galilee at the time of Jesus and concludes that:

The people of Galilee were the most religious Jews in the world in the time of Jesus. They were known for their great reverence for Scripture and the passionate desire to be faithful to it. Jesus was born, grew up, and spent his ministry among people who knew Scripture by memory, and who debated its application with enthusiasm. Boys learned to read by reading scripture at age 5. They gradually were introduced to more complicated parts of the Bible, until they were ready for their first Passover meal at the age of 12 or 13, commonly known as a milestone age, when a certain more mature understanding is possible — and not far from our Confirmation age to this day.

Jesus’ ability to be an authoritative leader was dependent on many factors: his inner strength, his gentle kindness, his boldness in embracing people others rejected, and also his

intellectual rigor. He was respected because he knew the scriptures inside and out. He knew them in his head and he knew them in his heart. He knew what they meant.

We have this one story, of Jesus eagerly sitting at the feet of the rabbis, soaking up all of the knowledge he can, asking questions, so absorbed in the process of learning that he somehow misses the fact that his parents are heading back home. From the time he was 12 until the time he was 30, 18 years...all we know is perhaps all we need to know: “Jesus grew in wisdom and in understanding.”

Our church tries to follow the example of Jesus by supporting a strong Christian Education program offering Faith Formation for all ages. We believe you DO need your brain at church! Sunday School begins at age 3 and continues through grade 7 with a carefully-chosen curriculum. Confirmation is a year-long program for 8th graders that includes study, working with a mentor, field trips and service projects. The youth group programs all include both study and service. For adults, we offer book clubs, sermon discussion on Sunday morning, Bible Study, retreats, and CrossTraining - six weeks of Wednesday night programming in the fall and spring. On Sunday, September 10, we will print a list of most of our programming dates and details for the year. I encourage you to participate as you can, and I certainly encourage you to know that your questions are welcome at this church. Asking questions is the best way to learn and grow.

God has given us our minds as an incredible gift. We're intended to use them fully. If they are a gift from God, there is no reason to ever be afraid of where they will take us.

One of the best movies of last year was “Hidden Figures.” Thank goodness that the story is no longer hidden. Thank goodness for the author who wrote the book unearthing the story of three African-American women who worked for NASA in the early 60s and played a vital role in the launch of John Glenn's mission into space. The character who receives central attention

is Katherine Goble Johnson, a math genius. Here is Katherine as a young girl in 1926, as her parents move to be closer to a school she needs to attend: **[CLIP ONE]**

The next time we see Katherine in the movie she is working for NASA. She faces cruel treatment, all with great dignity and determination. She is mistaken for a custodian. The first day of her new job, working hard, she walks to the coffee pot for a cup of coffee. The second day she arrives to see a second coffee pot, labeled “colored” and it is empty. She has to run a half-mile, in the obligatory dress and heels to the nearest “colored” restroom. And on and on it goes. Yet she persists. To his credit, her supervisor, played by Kevin Costner, sees her talent and understands that his department needs her. It was especially wonderful to see how Ohio’s favorite son, John Glenn, treated her and the other women, and that is true to fact. As this clip begins, though, we see one of the interactions she had with one of her colleagues. **[CLIP TWO]**

I re-watched this movie this week, so that I could write this sermon, and it was even more moving than the first time, in light of Charlottesville and all that has transpired since. And in the midst of writing this sermon, the news came from Barcelona and then there have been other acts of violence since. And it is all too apparent, all too obvious, that something isn’t working in our world right now. We need our very best minds to be at work, minds that are faithful, people who have moral courage. We need to find cures for cancer, all cancer including pediatric cancer and Ewing’s Sarcoma which claimed one of our own this week, and the other diseases which cripple life. We need to stand up against hatred, bigotry, intolerance, antisemitism, racism, and all the rhetoric of white nationalism and say in no uncertain terms that their values are NOT our values. We don’t have to lay blame on one person; racism has been around a long time. Is there any one here who has not ever harbored a racist thought? I know I stand convicted. We don’t have to all agree on which statue should be removed or where the statues belong. That conversation is a mere distraction. Do we or do we not believe that “we hold these

truths to be self-evident, that ALL are created equal?" It is the core of who we are as American citizens and it is the core of who we are as Christians, as children of God.

A few church members wrote me this week telling me that they are feeling disheartened and discouraged. Sometimes it seems that we aren't making any forward progress as a nation. I think I can understand some of the reasons for the rise in hate speech. I don't understand it all. But I know that we need our best minds at work to try to figure out how we can spread the message of God's inclusive love to more people. As this school year begins, let us show our support to our own Faith Formation program, and to all students, teachers, and schools in every way we can. God needs us to be engaged in this world with our hearts and minds.