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Homiletics

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Preaching Dialogically

INTRODUCTION

(The homiletics section this month attempts the impossible. The article develops the theory that the writing out of sermons actually "forfeits the decisive element of speech, the liveliness of immediate generation in the interplay between preacher and hearer." What follows is a sermon that was not written, but is printed in the form that it was caught on tape. If the theory is to be given credence, it is completely unfair to set down in print a sermon that was conceived and delivered in this dialogical conviction . . . unfair, that is, unless each reader reads with the realization that actually only his ears are assembling the meaning and his eyes are not really on the page but on the preacher. H. Armin Moellering has supplied the translation of the article, and Donald R. Hoyer the sermon. The first is to be thanked for his sharing of one article from a large field of German homiletical studies, the other for his willingness to share a sermon in the hope that it might be helpful "even negatively.")

Pastor Hoyer has reservations about the whole procedure — the writing down process loses the vitality of speech and makes for written material "that just isn't easy to read. Perhaps there is room for the tidying up that goes on, for instance, in the speeches that one reads in the *Congressional Record*." He explains, however, why he can no longer be slave to a manuscript. "I think of the time I had a dual parish and was returning to home base to preach the final sermon. On the way I heard that Marilyn Monroe had committed suicide. She made the sermon. I think of 'King' Kurth who made the papers in Fort Wayne when he stopped his sermon to tell the ushers to open windows because he was falling asleep. I think of the time we were worshiping in temporary quarters in which a telephone was located directly behind me as I was preaching — and it rang." What would *you* do? There is probably no experienced preacher who does not to a great extent function extemporaneously — at least in such a situation. But the specific premise that the writing of the sermon is actually destructive of the purpose of preaching might cause other bells to ring.)

GEORGE W. HOYER

WALTER J. HOLLENWEGER *

Hans Martin Mueller writes in his essay, "A Look into My Sermonic Library," that from Luther one can learn to preach dialogically. Luther

always has a real or a realistically imagined hearer before his eyes with whom he is having a heart-to-heart talk. In a way that is different from the "dialogue sermons" of our day, which are usually nothing more than monologues with variously assigned roles, Luther found in himself or in a meditatively visualized hearer a partner in the discussion. Into this dialogue he draws the one who

hears or reads his sermon. One is repeatedly struck by the extensive degree to which one feels himself addressed in Luther's preaching.¹

Preaching dialogically — we would all like that, but how is it done? Since — in an overstated formulation — the hearer is the object of my sermon,² the question is of the utmost significance: How do I visualize and understand my hearer? We have learned the exegesis of the historical texts, but how are we faring in our understanding of the multi-layered and, in the course of the exegesis, constantly changing context of the one who hears the sermon? To be sure, every pastor

* This essay by Hollenweger is included in *Predigtstudien für das Kirchenjahr 1969/1970, Perikopenreihe IV, 1. Halbband*, ed. Ernst Lange in association with Peter Krusche and Dietrich Rössler and is used here with permission of the publisher (Stuttgart-Berlin: Kreuz-Verlag, 1969), pp. 203—210.

¹ 1. Hans Martin Mueller, "Ein Blick in meine Predigtbibliothek," *Predigtstudien I*, 1 (1968), 227.

² Ernst Lange, *Briefe an einen Prediger*, p. 12.

will visit his members. He will speak with people, with potential listeners to his sermons. But is that enough? The pastor will follow TV, read newspapers and books. All the same, the question is justified: Does he thereby learn to know the person who comes to hear his sermon?

And now if various types of people come to hear the sermon (and for this we hope and pray), can I always speak to *the* listener, or will this generalization become colorless or, as happens to many noted pulpit orators, will those who gradually gather under my pulpit (*my* congregation³) be the listeners whom I have before my eyes in my sermonic preparation? What does the catholicity and ecumenicity of the church mean if the sermon in the interest of concreteness and comprehensibility leads to a delimiting sorting out of Christians?

Even if I succeed in getting a somewhat accurate picture of "my congregation," I still never know which associative spheres my words may suggest to my hearers. In "Letters to a Preacher," which has already been mentioned, Ernst Lange writes:

The fact that I use words and concepts which do not with sufficient clarity say what I should like to say, that I speak in pictures which illustrate nothing, that I address myself to experiences which my hearers have never really had, all this I see on their faces while I am still speaking.⁴

These questions are known to every preacher, and as long as there is evangelical preaching they will never admit of final answers. Preaching today demands diligence and self-criticism on the one hand, and, on the other, faith and a certain nonchalance toward success or failure.

Beyond this, one can ask himself whether there are not possible forms of proclamation besides our formal sermon. It is astounding that *our* sermonic form does not occur in the New Testament. The sermons reported there are all shorter than ours.⁵ Most of them take as their point of departure concrete questions and situations of the hearers and only exceptionally a Biblical text.

³ Lange, p. 15.

⁴ Lange, p. 7.

⁵ The argument that the New Testament narrators transmit only sermon summaries has form criticism against it. Form criticism emphasizes the oral transmission specifically of this part of the New Testament texts.

What then would such other possibilities of communication be? Here I think of the services of American Negroes, of Latin American Pentecostals, and of the Congolese Kimbanguists. Formally, to be sure, these preachers also proceed from a Biblical text. But the text only supplies for them, so to speak, "the sphere of association," the vocabulary, the critical categories of presentation for a discourse on the "life of the hearers," on Christ in the life of the hearers. These methods of communication have been described by theologians,⁶ sociologists,⁷ and poets.⁸ However, no description can take the place of personal observation. I recall, for instance, services in Chile: I am sitting up front on the podium next to the preacher on the only red plush chair reserved for guests of honor. Before me surges a human sea of believers, two or three thousand. There they sit with their earth-colored, almost lifeless faces. But the solo trumpeter scarcely plays his first melody, and life comes into the tired faces that bear the furrows of centuries-long suppression. Slowly they begin to dance. In a circle they dance the dances of their Indian forefathers. The non-dancers stand there touched and clap slowly. A woman prophesies in a deep voice that cuts through marrow and bone. Suddenly there is silence: they all go on their knees and thank God for the dance He has granted them. Up in the gallery on the left 50 or 100 cyclists in gray blouses are praying. They are the bicyclists who after the service will ride into the surrounding villages and during the entire Sunday will sing, pray, preach, and heal the sick under the open sky. In the evening they return, greeted by the congregation with a loud "Gloria a

⁶ For instance: D. Bonhoeffer, "Bericht über den Studienaufenthalt im Union Theological Seminary, New York, 1930/31," in *Gesammelte Schriften* I, ed. E. Bethge (Munich: Kaiser, 1958), 96—98.

⁷ For instance: Katesa Schlosser, *Eingeborenenkirchen in Süd- und Südwestafrika* (Kiel: Mühlau, 1958); Christian Lalive d'Épinay, *The Pentecostal Movement in Chile* (London: Luttermouth, 1969).

⁸ For instance: James Baldwin, *Gehe hin und verkünde es vom Berge* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1966). See also W. J. Hollenweger, *Enthusiastisches Christentum. Die Pfingstbewegung in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Zürich: Zwingli-Verlag; Wuppertal: Brockhaus-Verlag, 1969).

Dios," dragging behind them a tail of the curious who will be converted in the evening. The preacher preaches at the most two or three minutes without interruption. Then the congregation responds with acclamations, with prophecies or glossolalia, with spontaneous songs, so-called choruses, with Scripture citations. That is the material which serves the preacher for a further exegesis of two to three minutes. Here, of course, it is not possible to speak of logical or systematic organization. Rather one would have to speak of a liturgical ordering. The progress of the service develops according to the laws of association. But that is finally the pattern of thought and communication of *this congregation*.

A transposition to our situation is hardly thinkable, if for no other reason than that we have already forfeited the spontaneity of these Christians. The Chilean Pentecostals, for instance, asked me whether I also dance. That was the test question. They wanted to know whether I despised them or whether I identified with them. "I should very much like to," I answered respectfully. "But I cannot dance your dances." With that they were satisfied. After all, their own preachers do not dance either. The task of their preachers is not dancing but the interpretation of the dancing, the songs, the acclamations.

Although an appropriation of these worship forms appears unthinkable, several aspects of the process of communication that has been described can again become important for us. There are two examples:

I

A Pentecostal preacher not only sees it in the eyes of his hearers if they are not understanding him; he "hears the protest of his auditors with his viscera," even if his listeners are acoustically still, an observation that every halfway experienced preacher has already made. But we have unlearned the art of paying attention to such "corporeal warning signals." We rely on our manuscript instead of the signal that is built into our body to tell us: With these hearers this word, this sentence, is encountering opposition. If the opposition arises because the Gospel has been *understood*, then the fact that this is the situation must be made clear in the next sentence. But if the opposition arises from a misunderstanding, then the misun-

derstanding is to be clarified if this is possible. In this effort it does not help the preacher to persuade himself that the illustration has been understood elsewhere; the hearers *must* understand it. When the stone weighing on one's viscera becomes heavier, rationalistic explanations are of no use. In this contest between the warning signal "viscera" and the rational computer "brain" one should listen to the viscera.

In Eckhard Altmann I have found a fecund working out of the above described types of communication in primitive cultures that is helpful for our situation. With the aid of recordings he compared sermon manuscripts with the sermons as they were actually delivered. In doing this he established that a manuscript (whether in the head or on paper) hinders a preacher from comprehending the psychological field that arises between him and his hearers and from introducing it fruitfully into the interpretative process. The impulses that issue from the hearing congregation are only registered as disturbing factors in the process of memorization or delivery and are therefore rejected as quickly as possible, and this can be demonstrated by the speakers and their formal (not only substantial) dependence on the manuscript. Therefore Altmann comes to the conclusion that written preparation of the sermon presents "a mortal peril" for Christian proclamation. "The preacher who appears in the pulpit with his manuscript in his hand or head is inadequately equipped for his task of proclamation and witnessing."⁹

According to Altmann the manuscript method proceeds from two unproved premises:

First, that with a manuscript one can suitably prepare himself for an address, a sermon — an assumption theologically and methodologically demonstrated to be false. Second, that every other kind of preparation must inevitably lead to sloppiness and irresponsible improvisation in the pulpit — an assumption which is already suspect because its advocates have taken into account neither the pertinent methods nor the discipline of the science of speaking.¹⁰

⁹ Eckhard Altmann, *Die Predigt als Kontaktgeschehen*, in *Arbeiten zur Theologie*, Series I, Vol. 13 (Stuttgart: Calver-Verlag, 1963), 62. (Every preacher should be referred emphatically to Altmann's work, which had to be dealt with here in unfair brevity.)

¹⁰ Altmann, pp. 62—63.

Altmann then describes in detail the methods of the science of speaking and applies them to the sermon. They cannot be discussed extensively here. Altmann does *not* plead for an *unprepared*, but for a *differently prepared* sermon. To this other preparation belong schooling of the preacher in speaking freely, continued and methodical exegesis of the Scripture, working out a key word manuscript (in which citations are written on special slips of paper and in the course of the sermon are visibly read off and thereby marked out as citations), and so on. One of Altmann's most important points is his answer to the objection that the written out manuscript compels one to clarity in structure and formulation. "The logical development can be assured by the arrangement, but not the psychological."¹¹ Altmann answers:

The logical ordering [is] the ordering appropriate to an essay or other written presentations. But how shall the preacher while writing feel and perceive the totally different needs of the psychological ordering of a speech? To reach this goal the manuscript is the worst conceivable aid. In itself writing something out represents a considerable help and exercise in the precise comprehension and formulation of thoughts, and must in no case be given up. However, these uncontested facts cannot be used as an argument for writing out the sermon, precisely because what is at issue here is a form of speech.¹²

Altmann therefore proposes that in our culture we methodically think through and carry out the dialogical technique of sermonizing. He contrasts the "sketch man" with the "sentence man." The "sentence man" is the "type of man ensnared in writing, totally untrained in free speaking and expression, who considers his lack of proficiency a lack of oratorical ability. For the time being he fabricates paper speeches, that is, essays which are read off and that have forfeited the decisive element of speech, the liveliness of immediate generation in the interplay between preacher and hearer." The "outline man" speaks with "a relatively exhaustive undergirding of key words"; he is "however, basically untied from his manuscript," "for he stands, as Händler specifically observes, in living contact with his hearers,

¹¹ H. Schreiner, *Die Verkündigung des Wortes Gottes* (Hamburg, 1949), p. 268.

¹² Altmann, pp. 68—69.

that is, he is capable of positively incorporating the interplay of the social field into the process of speech making."¹³

II

There is still a second possibility of the dialogical sermon. It is "the discussion of the Bible."¹⁴ In this discussion one can distinguish the following phases:

a) *Exegetical introduction*: at the most 10 minutes, but even better only 3 to 5 minutes. The discussion leader outlines the historical situation of the text, explains difficult words or usages; in short he clears away the *preliminary* obstacles to comprehension.

b) *Opening up the discussion*: After the introduction the discussion is opened up with a question. The question must be announced as such. It must be clear that what is involved is not a rhetorical question. This is underlined by having the discussion leader remain silent after he has posed the question. Explanations of the question encumber the subsequent discussion. The question must be put in such a way that it requires no explanation.

c) After 10 minutes at the most, the discussion leader moves on to an *unfolding of the discussion*. That means: he presents the association of ideas, which were unsystematically brought up by the participants, in an ordered form as parts of a list of discussion topics. In doing this he must pay attention to two things: (1) Priority belongs to that which most occupies the people (and not, for instance, the exegetical scope of the text); (2) he dare not smuggle into his list of discussion topics any of his own thoughts, but he only groups together and summarizes what the participants have said.

If up to this point he has done everything correctly, then the discussion list he proposes will be accepted without further ado, because he only articulates what the group feels. From now on the discussion leader will pay strict attention to see that the group abides by the program, but since it is the program that the group itself has set up, he does not act on his own authority but on that which the group has bestowed on him.

d) The discussion leader requests the assent of the group *to discuss* the points they have made in a sequence he has determined. Now he can proceed in the following way: either he can ask the one who made the corresponding point

¹³ Altmann, pp. 69—70.

¹⁴ What follows is a summary of "Informationsbrief über Evangelisation," No. 1 (Jan. 1969), Geng, Ö R K.

or brought up the corresponding idea to comment on it, or once again he begins with a new (this time more circumscribed) lead question. From now on the discussion runs along, following the same scheme. The discussion of a point is concluded by having the discussion leader summarize the results and go on to the next point on the list.

The following is a short description of the most common errors of the discussion leader:

The leader poses a question calling for a definition (for example, in reference to Rom. 12:1-8: What is "reasonable service"?). In response to a question calling for a definition only those people answer who define, that is, who can formulate abstractly. In this way the majority of the group will be excluded from the discussion. Besides, it will be put on a false, rationalistic level. If one wants to pose the question about "reasonable service," then one can ask: What kind of ideas come to your mind when you hear the key word "reasonable service"? Describe your conception of what a "reasonable service" is. Why is "reasonable" and "service" no contradiction for Paul?

The leader poses an alternative question. For example, sticking with our text: Are our present-day services reasonable? To this question the group can respond with "yes" or "no." But what is interesting is the continuation, that is, the real question only comes later. Therefore the discussion leader should cut in with the real question: Which contemporary (churchly or worldly) examples occur to you that you would designate as "reasonable service"? Then one can add the further question: Why? In addition one can propose: Compare your criteria with those of Paul in this text.

The leader poses a bogus question. One poses a question to which he himself expects a specific answer. That can be a catechetical question (for example, In which part of the Letter to the Romans do we find ourselves here?), or a question of knowledge (What was the relationship of the apostle Paul to the Romans?), or a theological-systematic, eventually an ethical question, to which the questioner expects a specific answer (for example, in reference to v. 2: Are not too many people today conforming themselves to this world?). After such a question no discussion can arise, because the participants are boxed in by their knowledge (or lack of knowl-

edge, respectively) and the wishes of the discussion leader.

The opening of the discussion must be so executed that a participant of average gifts can immediately enter in on the basis of the text before him and his horizon of experience. Therefore the discussion leader is as taciturn as possible during the opening. He marks down the various contributions, groups them or makes mental notes (though for this he needs much experience). He uses the opening in order to get to know the participants. He takes note of where their interests, their emotional blocks lie.

He reacts to counter questions. Example: A participant responds with a question. He wants a word in the question of the leader to be defined. Or someone asks: Why do you ask us this? Here the discussion leader, especially if he suspects some hidden aggression or displeasure behind the question, must give the question back to the group. He must have confidence that his question is sturdy enough. If he enters into a debate with a member of the group, he loses his authority as discussion leader. It is one of the most important tasks of the leader, especially if there is an ecumenical composition to the group, to see that the participants speak with one another and not with the group leader.

The leader forgets the "silent half." In every group there are people who speak more readily, and others who always come too late. It is the task of the leader to observe the faces of the group. On many faces there is written agreement, skepticism, protest, without those concerned ever having asked for the floor. These group participants one can prod with tact and a little humor. They will then say, "I really didn't want to say anything, but . . .," and they are already in the middle of the discussion.

The leader forgets the Biblical text. Only after the opening does the leader become the attorney for the Biblical text. But then he must assume this role; otherwise the people will speak with each other in disregard of the text. At all decisive points the leader will bring in the text to be heard as a further partner in the discussion. That requires a careful exegetical preparation. This exegetical preparation can under certain circumstances only weakly be drawn upon, if the participants do not address themselves to

those points for which the discussion leader has prepared himself. One must accept the risk and make the best of it. It is smaller than the other one, namely, to explain things that are not asked.

Something should yet be said briefly *regarding the text*. Every participant must have a text in mind. Under certain circumstances parallel texts are to be printed alongside each other, possibly parallels from the realm of the profane. Whenever possible the text should be *mimeographed* (not printed); this permits the leader to add little clarifications intended for the appropriate group and to give alternative translations. Above all, in this way it is made easier for the participants to supplant the static concept of "Word of God" with the dynamic concept of event, "that God speaks to us."

For the kind of discussion described, the *place* where it is held is not inconsequential. Most suitable for the discussion is a room with movable chairs that has a round or square floor plan. At all events it is necessary that the participants see *each other*. They must not sit behind one another in church pews. The acoustics of the room must permit conversation in a normal speaking tone. On occasion it is also helpful if smoking and drinking are permitted. This is especially important if the discussion is carried on with the unchurched.

If possible the discussion leader should *not* stand, but be seated in the circle of participants. His authority specifically does not consist in his standing *over* the people, but in the fact that he articulates, orders, and summarizes *for* the participants.

SERMON BY

DONALD R. HOGER

Text: Luke 2:41-52 (Epiphany I)

Our text is today's Gospel from the second chapter of Luke. Hear again the last verse: "Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man."

This is one of those Scripture texts that one would like to throw out to the congregation so that we could take a vote as to what we wanted to do with it. We can go in so many different directions with this particular text depending on your mood as you listen or my mood as I prepared this sermon. Why, you know, you can use this section as a club for all kinds of reasons.

You can tell your children that they better study harder, Jesus did — and then you get a text on a child in school. You might suggest a text for parents who should do a better job at taking care of their children. Apparently, Mary and Joseph were a negative example of that. Or you might even find here reasons for coming to church, or, better yet, a real pitch for Bible study. Or one might even say that we have a good plug for confirmation class.

Well, we can go in all these directions, I suspect, and we can find a legitimate reason to quote the text in those directions. But I think none of them seems to get at the heart of what Luke was after. We have to give Luke more credit than just being someone who is trying to tell us to go to school — cheerfully. Somehow in the innocence of this storytelling Luke is trying to share something rather significant — and you don't have to go to school too long to catch it either. There is a great big gap in the life of Jesus from the coming of the Wise Men all the way up to His baptism by John at age thirty. We know very little about His life at all except for one incident, the incident related in this text. We recognize that Luke really has something in mind as he shares this story. He's after much more than giving some sort of a *Reader's Digest* version of tense, then happy, family living. One recognizes Luke's innocent reporting of the story. He forgoes all kinds of details and facts (which does become a bit frustrating). One remains curious about all that might have happened during this entire story. But Luke just shares the story as a brief historical fact and moves on from there.

Compare the story that Luke tells about Jesus with a person who lived not too long after Jesus, the Jewish historian Josephus. Let me tell you that Josephus didn't have much of that humility that Paul spoke about in this morning's Epistle. As Josephus presented his credentials as a historian, he went into great detail as to how much of the Old Testament law he really knew. That was not the kind of approach of Luke to this Jesus story. Or one looks at the apocryphal gospels, which were additions to the New Testament, and meets up with all sorts of fantastic stories about Jesus' childhood. We might get a taste of that fantasy from a couplet of Hillaire Belloc, who said of the

child Jesus at play that "Jesus made him all fowl out of clay, and blessed them till they flew away." It was that kind of idea that Luke was trying to overcome—that Jesus *wasn't* some fantastic wizard, but was a plain, ordinary person.

Yet even as Luke tells the story as plainly as that, we're still intrigued by a few things that suggest Luke's subtlety, too. This, as Luke says, is Jesus' first Passover, the first time He went to Jerusalem. Now contrast Jesus' first trip to Jerusalem with His last trip to Jerusalem and then hear this text once again. Remember the last time Jesus was in Jerusalem? Remember how He was questioned in the temple? Here, too, Luke has Him questioned in the temple. His last time in Jerusalem He reappeared after three days; the first trip He disappeared for three days. The last trip, the astonishment of those who were near Jesus; the first trip, the astonishment of Mary and Joseph. The first trip Jesus stated He must be about His Father's business, and His last trip He had to do the will of Him who sent Him.

So Luke just didn't flip out a story to fill in a bit of a historical gap. He was also trying to get at something quite fundamental. As he does he shares with us the uniqueness of Jesus Christ—how in this one person God and man came together. Paul could say it in a profound way in Philippians as he points out that God's Son emptied Himself and became a man. A theologian can find many fancy Latin phrases to say it. But Luke gets it said with this charming story. There's Jesus sitting in the temple *astounding* the elders there—a little bit of a glimpse of Him as more than a typical boy; and yet there He was like a typical boy, asking a whole lot of questions. There's the God-man, together, in this one unique youth; and there He is demonstrating that uniqueness. You have Jesus as a normal boy wandering off and forcing His parents into a dither to find Him. And yet as more-than-a-boy sitting there in the temple discussing some things—the things the average boy would normally not be too interested in. Luke was trying to say that in this setting, in this person, there was some activity beyond the activity that one would normally meet up with. A normal boy, yet more than normal. Why, God and man!

Notice, for instance, when Jesus heard Mary's concern that "Your father and Your

mother have been worried about You," Jesus picked it up and said, "Yes, but I am concerned about My *Father's* business." He switches her question—the question that was directed in one way—into a different thrust altogether. That is, Jesus heard the statement as a boy, but directed it back to her with the response of the Messiah, demonstrating rather casually His uniqueness. When home again, He didn't threaten to return to lock Himself up in the temple to memorize the Jewish law so that He might later recite it better to people as some sort of a high-pressure proof of His godliness; instead He continued to be more involved in life as a man, while at the same time working out His life as God.

As we said earlier, the apocryphal gospels made up all kinds of wild stories of Jesus in His early years. One could imagine Luke sitting down to write the gospel knowing about some of those wild stories that were circulating. So Luke was determined that this removed person was not the God-man that he wanted people to know better. Instead of writing a big long apology and explaining that such preposterous distortions just were not the case, he chose instead to share this one positive account out of Jesus' earlier life. You ought to read some of that way-out stuff in those apocryphal accounts: Jesus comes into the temple, He sits around and all of a sudden He begins to discuss metaphysics, astronomy, and all kinds of subjects to the absolute amazement of the temple scholars. You see, that's not the kind of thing that Luke wanted to share, because he didn't want our Jesus to be removed that far from the reality of human life. Instead, he wanted Jesus to be a very real person, like us, as God yet man, down here in our kind of life, walking that route to Jerusalem, having a ball, singing not only the Psalms, but I suspect some of those good folk songs, enjoying His singing so much that He might have forgotten the necessary quota of Lutheran chorales, enjoying His chats with His friends along the way, maybe even discussing who had the better set of parents, then stopping there in the temple to do more than what His friends would normally do. See how sneaky Luke is as he shows us a person who was more than a man. It's that uniqueness that makes this story so significant.

We indicated before that Luke possibly told this story with Jesus' last trip to Jeru-

salem also in mind. If he did, then we recognize what this uniqueness is all about — that whole process God had in mind when He decided to send His Son into our world for us — a plan that is capsuled in this account of Jesus at age twelve. He became a man for our sake. There, as a man, He was looking at the Old Testament law under whose jurisdiction He had placed Himself for us. There with the scribes, I suspect, He wasn't saying, "See that passage that is speaking about Me?" but rather He was getting glimpses from them as to what His committed life was really all about. Jesus, as man, was gradually understanding His special calling — a calling that ended up on that last trip to Jerusalem where He went to the last Passover. Finally, death itself — for us — the ultimate demonstration of that unique plan of God embodied in this unique person.

The struggle toward maturity that Luke let us see at age twelve continued all the way up to that moment on the cross when Jesus cried out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Then the struggle ended, with the winner's announcement springing forth on that first Easter.

Now Luke's whole picture comes out clearer for us — God and man in this one person. And as we share that we can move back to what we said at the start this morning. Yes, the story does have something to say about confirmation class, and it does have something to say about children behaving, and it does have something to say about parents' response to their children. But back again to our opening words — if we had called for your vote then, what would we have received? Dare I guess that you children would hope that I would give your parents some advice while you parents would hope that I would really get after those children? Those in confirmation class would hope I wouldn't say too much about what an angel Jesus really was at age twelve. I suppose I could safely guess those responses because that's just a bit of human nature. We're so sure of ourselves that we just know

all the rest are the ones who need to improve.

How did you react? Hoping *they* would find improvement? We just said that this text does have something to say about our behavior. Certainly not using Jesus as a policeman with a club inscribed "Behave yourself like Me." Instead, this text gives us a glimpse of God's new life working itself out in a human life. It's that new life that was being demonstrated in that young boy. And it is that new life that was made our life when we were baptized. That quick flashback to your reactions at the start of this morning — is it measured against this inquisitive young man?

Because of our relationship to this Jesus, our calling as parents and children, responding to children and parents, springs from what Jesus did in His life for us. That idea comes home when we look at Mary's response to this particular situation. She indicated to Jesus that His behavior wouldn't earn Him normal on a Gesell book's chart. Why, one could imagine that she might have violated some of those rules psychologists are always dreaming up as she told Jesus that none of the rest of the boys in the block did what He did. Jesus answers her with that strange comment that comes out different in each translation one reads — perhaps because the translators are afraid to let Jesus be normal — whereupon Luke comments that Mary held all these things in her heart. There's a good clue for us, too, as we live out the Christ life. We don't always understand what God's real work and plan are for us. Yet, in the midst of these questions that we do have we can say, "Yes, God, I hear You," without being able to say, "Yes, God, I understand You." Mary pondered! Somewhere there's a meaning to it all! Meanwhile, in the absence of the ultimate answers our life is one that rejoices over this look at a little boy sitting around learning, because it's the story of God come as man for us.

Amen.

Hyde Park, New York