

Jesus, Age 12, at the Temple

Colleagues,

I was asked to be the homilist on the last Sunday of 2009 at our home congregation here in St. Louis, Bethel Lutheran. Here's the manuscript I prepared. Most of it got proclaimed.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

The Gospel for the First Sunday after Christmas: Luke 2:41-52.

Jesus, age 12, at the Temple.

At Immanuel parochial school, Rock Island, Illinois, 70 years ago, the punchline of this text that we kids memorized was: "Wist ye not that I must be about my father's business?" That word "business" has some advantages over the current translation, "father's house." [Neither noun is actually in the Greek text.]

So what is his Father's business?

Luke would say: Read my next 22 chapters. We'll be doing that throughout 2010 nearly every Sunday.

Let's stop at just two places:

- The almost last verse of Luke's gospel 24:47f. " . . . that repentance and the forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in my name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses."
- a chapter in the middle: Luke 15. Three parables of the

lost: sheep, coin, boys.

–So what’s the Father’s business? finding, rescuing, God’s own lost kids. Bringing the lost kids back home.

In Bible vocabulary those two phrases are synonyms: Repentance & forgiveness = turn around & come home.

So who is lost? That’s what Jesus may have been discussing with the theologians already at age 12. For it became the constant topic with these same temple managers, yes, the constant barricade Jesus ran into as a grown man, when he went about the Father’s business FULL TIME.

Luke 15 is already an answer: Two sorts of God’s lost kids. The run-away renegade hell-raiser, the patent commandment-breaker, AND the elder brother who “played it straight” but showed at the end that he loved neither his Father nor his brother, thus breaking the two BIG commandments. The Father’s business is to get both sorts back home. But it won’t be easy.

Is this all Ho, hum, goldie-oldie religion talk? Repentance and forgiveness of sins? Kids lost to God and being found again? Come on, preacher, we’re now in a secular age. Not too many folks interested in such stuff anymore. Pastor Bill Yancey’s pizza-man in his sermon two weeks ago said it: “None of those guys working for me care about God.”

So they may think, we’re not interested in what Luke is showing us, but why are they then competing with God in God’s own business? Can that be true? Folks who don’t believe in God nevertheless competing with God in the Father’s business? Wait a minute!

First a little story. Fred Niedner, prof at Valparaiso University, once teased an audience by saying: “Guess what, sex is NOT the most powerful human drive. What then is? The drive to

be right. And if you don't believe that, just get married."

The drive to be right, to demonstrate, prove, that I'm not wrong. Not just in moral stuff, but in my opinions, in my overall life.

And that's where we bump up against the Father's business. As COMPETITORS. Running our own make-myself-right business.

Not only does Jesus' Father say, "Hey, kids, that's MY business," but with a tearful eye: "You'll never make it running your own business on this one. You're doomed from the git-go."

DIAGNOSIS:

COMPETING with God in the Father's business is a three-step tragedy.

1. We all do it, but never get done with it. You may think you proved that you were right today in all your actions and relationships, but tomorrow you'll have to do it again.
2. The compulsion to do that is itself the sickness. Not trusting God to do God's business. Frank Sinatra's feisty claim "I'll do it my way" in getting yourself right, making yourself OK is already a statement of unfaith. "God, I don't trust that you will make me right YOUR way."
3. To try to take over the Father's business is not only stupid, it's impossible. It's finally lethal. Like trying to do your own heart operation. Self-surgery is suicide.

PROGNOSIS

Jesus SETS UP THE FATHER'S BUSINESS HERE ON EARTH, & invites us to move from being COMPETITOR in the Father's business, to being a CUSTOMER, and then (wow!) COLLABORATOR.

4. First the Father and the Son set up his business on earth. The Forgiveness business. Founding day is Christmas. Shop open for business—full business set up by Easter and Pentecost. Yes, there is Good Friday that same Easter weekend when we see the nitty-gritty of what ALL it takes to get sinners forgiven, to get God's lost kids brought back home. There's a little three-letter Greek word here—D – E – I—translated "must" in the "must be about my father's business." It pops up more often in Luke than in any other gospel. This is not the must of compulsion or coercion, but the must of dedication and commitment. "In order to get the job done, this is what I 'must' do—all the way to Good Friday to get the forgiveness business going here on earth." The Father too "must" make a big investment, investing the best he has. His own dear child, joined to Mary's human child—divine DNA and our human DNA all in one package—true God & true man. Here "true" doesn't simply mean he REALLY was God, he REALLY was a human, but he TRULY is the Father's SON, TRULY doing the Father's business, TRULY one of us to get us into the shop of his father's business.
5. He invites us to be CUSTOMERS of the Father's business. It's a two-step. Repentance and getting your sins forgiven. 'Fessing up to being lost and then coming back home with Jesus showing the way. Better still, Jesus BEING the Way. REPENTANCE doesn't mean breast-beating, but turning around. Stop being COMPETITOR and start being CUSTOMER. CUSTOMER means coming to the shop to get the goodies. And since the Son has already put down his life for the cost of forgiveness, the goods are handed out free. "Sola gratia" in church lingo. On the house. "Young man, you'll be glad to hear this: Your sins are forgiven." Come back home. The Father is waiting. There's a place set for you at the table.

6. COLLABORATOR, PARTNER.

And as if that weren't good enough, he adds the year-end bonus. Come join the business as a Partner, Collaborator. Now that you're enjoying the goodies, get into distribution. Luke's words at the end of his gospel, that mission mandate from Jesus, might be rendered: "Keep the business going, starting in Jerusalem, or St. Louis, and move on out to the ends of the world. You are my field representatives. I am sending you." It's SUCH A DEAL! It's the forgiveness business, "my Father's business." When we lost kids come home and get brought into the business it is no longer just Jesus' Father's business, but OUR Father's business.

Summa, But it's not all peaches and cream. At least on two angles.

Angle ONE. We keep backsliding into the COMPETITOR posture. Every day for me. Just ask Marie when the last time was that I tried to show her that I was right! Or the last time you did the same with spouse, sibling, parent, friend—or even enemy?

We're chronic competitors and need daily turn-around. But that option is now wide open. It's the Father's business. The invitation to turn from Competitor to Customer is the daily "special" in the Father's business.

Angle TWO. Besides ourselves backsliding into competition, our American culture offers a number of competitors to Jesus' Father and his Father's business. One that has come upon us this Christmas time is the blockbuster movie AVATAR. A New York Times reviewer this week said:

It's fitting that James Cameron's "Avatar" arrived in theaters at Christmastime. Like the holiday season itself, the science fiction epic is a crass embodiment of capitalistic excess

wrapped around a deeply felt religious message. It's at once the blockbuster to end all blockbusters, and the "Gospel According to James." But not the Christian Gospel. Instead, "Avatar" is Cameron's long apologia for pantheism—a faith that equates God with Nature, & calls humanity into religious communion with the natural world.

Pantheism offers a different sort of solution: a downward exit, an abandonment of our tragic self-consciousness, a re-merger with the natural world our ancestors half-escaped millennia ago.

But except as dust and ashes, Nature cannot take us back. [Such deep theology in the NYT!]

That IS one way to “get back home.” It’s not just this movie. We are bombarded by such offers—day in, day out— in our American way of life. They offer ways to get right, to get back home. But it comes under another “name.” A distinctively different name brand. Check them out and see if when all is said in done, dust and ashes is not their way to get back home.

The forgiveness business going on “in Jesus’ name” is REALLY different. It genuinely IS the Father’s business. The others aren’t. They’re pretend competitors. Jesus—now running his Father’s business worldwide—offers a better way, and a better home to get back to. It’s dust and ashes vs. life that lasts. So come to THIS store to do your business—to get right, to get home.