
Emerging Peers of Our Elder Brother Jesus

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Christmas 2 – Year B

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Everybody loves a gifted child, right? Well, maybe. Actually, we have some ambivalences about gifted children. Now I don't mind telling you how this issue comes up for me personally. For example, it happens every time I see that game show on TV, "Are You Smarter than a 5th Grader."

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Are_You_Smarter_than_a_5th_Grader%3F_\(American_game_show\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Are_You_Smarter_than_a_5th_Grader%3F_(American_game_show))

Now I won't lie to you. I have never actually watched the show! The reason is precisely because I resent being made to feel stupid. On the one hand I admire and even enjoy others' wits and energy. On the other I still pride myself on having been one of those gifted children myself as a schoolboy. So I'm a little sensitive when it comes to watching a game show whose title seems all about making adults feel stupid instead of simply admiring, supporting, and encouraging young people.

Now in today's gospel we also get to see Jesus as a gifted child—indeed, as God's gifted child. Here we are, on the 2nd Sunday after Christmas, and the boy Jesus has already grown up to be a 12-year-old teenager! Yet he's already holding his own in conversation with the teachers in the Jerusalem temple.

But wait. There's something different here. This isn't what we might have expected. With Jesus portrayed as a boy genius, we might have expected an overwhelming display of gifted intelligence. In fact there are apocryphal gospels where he indeed acts like a spoiled brat. These gospels were excluded from our Bible canon precisely because they show Jesus acting out of character.

Now Jesus as an *enfant terrible* or a mean-spirited youth is not even hinted at in our brief snapshot in today's gospel. No, here we find something completely different in Luke's story. There he is in all his teenage smartness—a gifted child showing himself for the first time to be as intelligent as he wants to be. But then, just sentences later, we see him cooperating with his parents; returning home with them and humbling himself to be—as the gospel says—"obedient to them."

And not only that. Our opening prayer appointed for today—the Collect for this 2nd Sunday after Christmas, echoes these two images of Jesus; Jesus as the gifted child contrasted with Jesus as the cooperative teenager. Listen again to these two Collect themes, and hear how they parallel the two contrasting images of the boy Jesus, as we pray as follows:

O God . . . Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity,
your Son Jesus Christ . . .

'Jesus humbling himself to share our humanity!' Now we see how that Collect theme parallels the gospel image of Jesus as a cooperative teenager. I want to return to it in a few minutes. And of course we also need to take account of the Collect's other theme: the theme of ourselves sharing in Christ's divinity.

But first I'm intrigued by this theme of Jesus humbling himself and its connection with a comic story that you might think is unrelated or even inappropriate. But stay with me for a moment.

Do you recall one of Groucho Marx's most familiar lines?

'I refuse to belong to an organization that would accept me as a member!'

Now as a stand-alone joke that's been regarded as one of Groucho's most hilarious one liners. It offers a great example of wit and irony. When you first hear it, it sounds like he's putting himself down. He gets us all to laugh with him or at him, by implying that an organization that would accept someone of his low standards or qualifications must not be an organization worth belonging to. Ha, ha, ha.

But further insight into Groucho's genius as a jokester suggests he might be expressing exactly the opposite interpretation. So consider whether the joke is expressing inferiority, or instead pretending inferiority while actually masking a secret or covert superiority?

Well, as it happens, here's an article that actually addresses that question by giving us the joke's original context. It's described in an article called, "The Original Function of Groucho Marx's Resignation Joke." Here's the gist of the comment.

[Groucho Marx's resignation joke is] one of the most striking examples of a self [put-down which] turns out to have been motivated by . . . the [jokester wanting] to dissociate . . . from a group of people to whom he [actually] felt superior.

Superior? Wow. Well, here's Groucho telling the background story in his own words:

I'm not a particularly gregarious fellow. If anything, I suppose I'm a bit on the misanthropic side. I've tried being a jolly good club member, but after a month or so my mouth always aches from baring my teeth in a false smile. The pseudo-friendliness, the limp handshake and the extra firm handshake (both of which should be abolished by the Health Department), are not for me . . .

[But] Some years ago, after considerable urging, I consented to join a prominent theatrical organization . . . Here, I thought, within these hallowed walls of Thespis, we would sit of an evening with our Napoleon brandies and long-stemmed pipes and discuss Chaucer . . . Ruskin, Voltaire [Shakespeare] . . . [Bernhardt and] the Barrymores . . . and all the other legendary figures of the theatre and literature. The first night I went there, I found thirty-two fellows playing gin rummy with marked cards, [and] five members shooting loaded dice on a suspiciously bumpy carpet. . .

A few nights later the club had a banquet. I don't clearly remember what the occasion was. I think it was to honor one of the members who had successfully managed to evade the police for over a year . . .

That particular night I was sitting next to a barber who had cut me many times, both socially and with a razor. At one point he looked slowly around the room, then turned to me and said, "Groucho, we're certainly getting a lousy batch of new members!"

I chose to ignore this remark and tried talking to him about Chaucer, Ruskin and Shakespeare, but he had switched [from denouncing new members like myself] to denouncing electric razors as a death blow to the tonsorial arts, so I dried up and resumed drinking.

The following morning I sent the club a wire stating, PLEASE ACCEPT MY RESIGNATION. I DON'T WANT TO BELONG TO ANY CLUB THAT WILL ACCEPT ME AS A MEMBER.

—G. Marx, 1959: 320-321. Cited by Richard Raskin, "The Original Function of Groucho Marx's Resignation Joke;" accessed by this author on 12/31/2010 at www.16-9.dk/2007-02/side11_inenglish.htm

What does that story have to do with today's scripture themes for this 2nd Sunday after Christmas? Consider what might occur if I highjacked Groucho Marx's resignation joke and transposed it to the lips of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. What it might have sounded like for Jesus to say something similar? Imagine something like this:

'I refuse to belong to a species that would accept me as a member!'

Of course not, right? That kind of declaration would be completely out of character for the person and personality whom we know as the Jesus of the gospels. Rather, a genuine humility is essential to the character of who Jesus was. Indeed, whether he is regarded as merely human or actually divine, humility remains among

his key virtues in any case.

So that's why we make this prayer request to share in Jesus' humility and humanity in today's Collect—to recall it once again:

O God . . . Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity,
your Son Jesus Christ . . .

But as I promised above, we also need to take account of the Collect's other theme for today: the theme of ourselves sharing in Christ's divinity.

That is one of my favorite themes in all of Christian theology. Its called in the Eastern or Greek Orthodox tradition, 'theosis.' It means, divinization or in-godded-ness. And it means that human beings can become so identified with God's character as portrayed in the gospel stories of Jesus that we begin to participate in his very essence or energy. A related word in that regard is 'theurgy,' meaning the works that God performs that are characteristic of divine energies and powers.

So when our Collect begins with those parallel phrases—

O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully
restored, the dignity of human nature . . .

—I consider that this is the dignity that is being restored to us by our becoming followers of Jesus: the dignity of becoming divinized or in-godded—becoming Christ-like; like him in character, even temperament and behavior, motivations and actions.

What could that look like, for you and for me?

Here's a likely illustration, that I offer you from my own experience as a college student. At my college, still to this day, faculty members are quite particular about being called tutors rather than teachers, instructors or professors. The principle is a democratic one; a conscientious effort to create a peer relationship with students like myself who, in our day, could also have been thought of as gifted is one way or another.

I recall in particular an upper-level math class where the subject was a very complex theorem. We had all been assigned to do our best to master the math, but it was clear that day in class that most of us were not able to do so. Soon it became clear that even our tutor was not able to manage the demonstration. Then there occurred an event that even today remains a hallmark of my undergraduate education.

It happened that our brightest student in the class had worked out the math with clarity and care. As his responses to everyone else's questions and confusions became more and more convincing, the tutor did something remarkable. He graciously invited our star classmate to take charge of the remaining class period and lead all of us, including himself, in seeing how to complete the assigned demonstration.

As I said, I will never forget that class. It was itself a kind of demonstration of my one of my school's principal claims: that the faculty are only older students of the subject matter, always still learning themselves, but simply more experienced from previous years of study. It was with humility therefore, that every tutor was in theory prepared to learn something new from every student as well as from other faculty who were professional peers. But we students in that regard were also regarded as possessing a kind of peer relationship; as emerging peers we might say.

Church family and friends of Christ, in the Incarnation we are being invited to be emerging peers of our elder brother Jesus. By divine will he chose to share our humanity so that we could become god-like ourselves in the particular ways that he demonstrated by his life, death and power over death. Let's take him up on that offer. Let's be gifted students of that life and, by saying yes to his invitation, be fully restored to the dignity of human nature.

In the Name of God: Our Creator, Defender, and Elder Brother. Amen.