

December 26, Christmas 1 (Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2:41-52)

## **Why am I so skeptical about sitting and learning at the feet of others?**

by [Laurel Mathewson](#) in the [December 15, 2021](#) issue

A Sudanese American parishioner of mine had recently received word that her father had died suddenly in Juba. Expecting shock and sadness, I sat with Achol and tried to get a sense of the current family landscape. Instead, she took the lead in the conversation and gently led me back in time, introducing me to a “holy and beloved” man, an irrigation technician and farmer, a father clothed in love. Her series of stories and descriptions might as well have been scripted on this week’s Colossians reading, virtue by virtue, though Achol spoke only from the script of her remembrance.

“He was a very good father,” she said. “He always sat with us for meals and talked with us. Unlike many of the men who would always be out with their friends playing dominoes, he was home.” I heard simple devotion and was glad for her. But then, this: “When we got in trouble, he would never curse or yell or let his mouth get away from him. He would talk to us calmly about what we had done wrong, instructing us.” A meek, gentle, kind man, I thought. How lucky she was. No wonder her own spirit and temperament are so gracious.

But the layers of beautiful Christlike clothing kept coming into view. “He refused to take a second wife, even though that was very normal. Even my mom used to tease him and beg him, ‘Get a second wife to help me and to help you!’” Achol laughed. He wouldn’t do it; he wanted to build a family another way. He would sacrifice the status gained from a bigger family. “And it’s probably hard for you to understand, but back home there are things men simply don’t do. They think it is their right not to do it. But he helped my mom a lot, almost every day. He would go to the market for her, to buy groceries. ‘What would you like?’ he would ask her each morning.” He did not take the entitlements afforded to him by his status and culture—a living picture of humility in relationship.

Then the lens shifted to outside the family, and the colors only grew richer. “His best friend got tuberculosis, and even his wife abandoned him for fear of getting sick. But my father took care of him as his friend died, bathing him and feeding him. Here we have all the protective equipment, but not there. With his bare hands, he did what his friend needed.” The colors of compassion and courage emerged in vivid array. Finally, she told me about her father’s patience and peace. “When the war came to our town of Renk, bullets were flying and people were panicking, running away. But he told us to stay in our home and wait until it was quieter to move. He was right. My younger sister, just 12 or 13 years old, didn’t listen, though, and she ran off in the chaos. After we were safe he went out into the jungle and found her on the third day, alive.”

Achol’s family had been mourning this remarkable man in true Colossians fashion: with gratitude in their hearts, praying and singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. “Most of all, he taught us the word of God,” she said. “Oh, he couldn’t read,” she clarified, after I suggested the image of a father reading scripture with his family. “The war disrupted his education. He learned the word from a young age from people who used to come and sit in the house, sharing stories and teaching.” He passed it on within his family. Achol reads Arabic beautifully, but I have always been impressed by her hermeneutic of love when discussing scripture—she obviously learned the essence of God’s word away from the page, in part from a man who couldn’t read the name Christ yet chose to clothe himself in Christ’s love.

Why was I so surprised to hear that her father learned the faith he lived so well “only” through oral teaching? I know that this is how most Christians have done it throughout history. Yes, I exist within a literacy-centric framework. But beyond this easy answer lies a darker Protestant and postmodern prejudice: skepticism about learning at the feet of others. As a pastor and parent, I act on the belief that instruction in the faith is essential to the spiritual journey. But how much has an individualistic, pave-your-own-way-to-the-heart-of-God worldview crept in?

In Luke 2, another preteen lost to his anxious parents is found alive on the third day. He is sitting among religious teachers—he *must* be, he says—in his “father’s house” or about his “father’s business,” depending on the translation. The contemporary church has decentered the house and emphasized the business. Yet it was essential even for Jesus to sit with teachers, learning in community from elders (even as he surprised them with his wisdom). We rightly acknowledge with Mary that we cannot presume to know where Jesus is or should be. But Luke’s account of the temple

stands against our temptation to prematurely proclaim that Jesus has left the building for good—that God’s only “real” business is out in the world. There is a necessary time for learning, just as there is for action.

St. Teresa of Ávila describes the second dwelling place in *The Interior Castle*, where we encounter Christ, as those times in our life when Jesus primarily speaks to us through the words of others farther along the path. Sermons, books, and conversation are traditional house-of-God means of understanding what God’s business in the world is about. We never know what manner of life might be born from an intentional circle of sacred stories, honest questions, and holy witness.