



The Perfect Imperfect Family

Luke 2:41-52

“Now, every year Jesus’ parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. When Jesus was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival.

When the festival ended and they started to return, Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day’s journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends.

When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting with the teachers, listening to them, asking them questions.

All who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished. His mother said to him, “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.”

He said, “Why were you searching for me? Didn’t you know that I needed to be in my Father’s house?” But they did not understand what he said to them.

Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and obeyed them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.”

The story of Jesus at twelve years old, separated from his parents in Jerusalem for three days, often evokes similar stories from parents. I say this from personal experience.

It was more than twenty-five years ago that it happened, but I remember it like yesterday. My Mom and I had taken my son Matt and

daughter Grace for a visit in New York City, with Grace still in a stroller and Matt about 4 years old. It was just after Christmas and we went to visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art, partly to get out of the cold. In the busy museum we all got into an elevator and quickly were pushed to the back. We went up a few floors; the doors opened, and lots of folks got off, including young Matt, who was accidentally whisked out by the crush of the crowd.

I reached out to grab him, but was too late. The door closed, with us standing in the back of the elevator looking at him just standing there, leaving my Mother and I desperately wondering what we could do, and wondering what Matt would do!

Now, elevators need to go all the way up before they come back down, so we went to the top floor, all the while frantically worried, desperate as to what he was going to do. Would he take the next elevator to the top to meet us there?

Would he wait where he was? And what should we do, get off on the top floor or go back down?

I can't remember how we decided to stay on the elevator; maybe it was so crowded we couldn't get off even if we wanted to. So we went back down to the floor where we hoped to find Matt.

We held our breath when the door opened - what would we do if he wasn't there?

The door opened. There he stood, straight and proud. "I just stood here," he said, "I knew this was the right thing to do."

How right he was, and how happy we were!

(Again, I still remember it like it was yesterday!)

Our family stories stay with us and influence us far more than we realize. The Bible story of Jesus' family is both familiar and turns on its head our notion of the perfect family.

The account of Jesus lost and then found by his parents also serves as a 'prefiguring' event in Luke's Gospel. It foreshadows Jesus who is lost and then found by his disciples in a number of ways.

Eventually Jesus goes to the city of Jerusalem and escapes to the Garden of Gethsemene, alone, and brings worry and alarm to his disciples. Later there's another finding that happens after three days, and again, the disciples are confronted with their own lack of understanding.

"Did you not understand that I must be about my Father's business," and "Did you not know it necessary for the Messiah to suffer these things in order to enter his glory?"

These stories are not exact parallels, but they relate to each other enough to announce that there is purpose in history, that something else is in the works in human life other than randomness, chance, or destruction.

Key in this story is Jesus' commitment to his Father's business which overrides the fear of his parents' concerns.

Mary and Joseph were sore afraid; (what a phrase!) And then, amazed at what they saw in the Temple; there was young Jesus, going toe-to-toe with the teachers! What they witnessed shows that Jesus' wisdom doesn't come through normal channels. Jesus is holy in a special way, then and now.

You can trace this through different Bible stories different ways. If a barren woman bears a son, if a boy kills a Goliath, if someone makes water spring from a rock, if manna falls from heaven, the conclusion is that there's something more than just the usual involved.

Jesus' wisdom is an closeness with God that makes the Temple a natural home, and shows Jesus the path to follow.

It's a path his heavenly Father has set for him, even if his earthly parents don't fully understand.

Later, the disciples won't fully understand the path Jesus chooses when he turns toward the dangerous city of Jerusalem, rather than returning to the safe shores of Galilee, or to his home in Nazareth.

In his response to his parent's questions to him after they find him, "Why have you treated us like this, after we've been frantically searching for you?" Jesus responds with a message that God's plan takes priority over all else. No matter how inscrutable God's plan may appear, however mysterious it may be, there's deep wisdom there, beyond our ken. The fear we bring to the unexpected can turn into amazement when we see God's gracious hand working it out. No matter how incomprehensible, God's grace and presence remain; and many times all this is unveiled in the context of family life.

Here's another story to bring this home a bit... the author and storyteller Father John Shea once mentioned a gimmick that he heard a priest use in a sermon.

The priest entered the pulpit with a small trophy and told the congregation that he had an announcement to make. He had prayed about all the families in the parish and decided to make an award to the family that most resembled the holy family.

What happened next got interesting. As the story goes, when the priest made this announcement, the church went dead quiet. The people just stared at the priest with a look that said 'What have you just done?'

What was he doing with this stunt? People think that holiness means perfection. No negative feelings, no hurtful words, no stretching the truth, kids obedient to their parents and parents always understanding their kids.

If there is friction, the Perfect Family heals it in a half-hour, like an old TV sit-com. But real family life is complex, deep, ongoing... There's always some discord, mistakes, grudges, lack of communication. When judged against the model of perfection we hold, no family is holy. Even Jesus spoke strong words to his parents and his parents had stern words for him.

So what was the priest going after?

It was all about having people give up the 'holiness is perfection' complex. The trophy was given to a single Mom with two kids still in grammar school, struggling but faithful; generous, kind and a model of a loving parent, struggling with all that life had dealt her.

I still don't know what to think about the trophy gimmick, but I agree that equaling perfection with holiness is a poor model of the actual give and take of family life, and sometimes it really causes harm.

The story of the boy Jesus who is lost and found concludes with the simple words that he grew in **age**, **wisdom** and **grace**.

With **age** comes the inner shifting and outer changes for new things to happen. What's impossible for the pre-teen child is possible for the 19 year old, what the young father could not put up with, the older father accepts, what the mother always feared would happen has happened, and now she can accept it. As long as there is time, there will be opportunities of redemption and celebration.

In the gospels, **wisdom** is not a holy mystery or pie in the sky hope. Wisdom is the knack of keeping the Spirit alive; one who builds their house upon rock and not sand, who looks beyond themselves, who persists in hope as part of the steady diet of daily living.

And '**grace**' points to a quality in life that begins on the inside and emerges on the outside with new energy and action. The presence of grace at the center of life means that everyone is capable of surprising actions, anytime. Although families are notorious for putting one another in boxes, the grace of each person may break out of the box and bring out acts of selflessness and love.

Family holiness is not about perfection. Nor is it about premature judgements of failure or self-congratulatory accolades of success. It is about people living in relationship with one another, recognizing their

shared spiritual center, discovering opportunities for their shared spirits to flourish.

Most of all, holiness is a relationship we are invited into by the One who lived for all, died for all, and rose for all of us- those who trust, and especially for those who don't. For we know that in God's goodness, all who are lost will indeed be found, even those who do not know they are lost, but whose hearts are open to love.

So it is that we are invited to our worship of God today and then can live out our lives, every day we are given, in the name of Mary and Joseph's son, our brother, Lord and friend. In Jesus' name, Amen.