

“PARENTS AND CHILDREN”

Luke 2:41-52

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Welcome to the Sunday after Christmas! No more stories of sweet little babies for us. Nope. Today we have the only story in all of scripture about Jesus' youth, how Mary and Joseph took him to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover when he was 12, and on their way home realized he was no longer among the travelers. They hurried back to the Temple, frantic with worry, searched for three days—think about that, 3!!! Days—and there he was, their son Jesus speaking with the scholars, dismissing his parents and all their concern with, “Did you not know I would be in my father’s house?” Sacrilegious as it might be to speak this way about our Lord and Savior, don’t you just want to smack him?

Really, what strikes me as interesting about this story is Luke’s craft as a story teller. On the one hand, you can read this story as a sign of Jesus’ special nature. He, a young boy from the country, at age 12 could go head to head with the serious Big City biblical scholars of his age. On the other hand, this is such a classic story of adolescence, of coming of age, beginning the separation that appropriately takes place between young people and their parents. Isn’t it sort of comforting to you that that took place between Jesus and his parents? This holy family is so often portrayed in stained glass windows that we fall into thinking that they lived stained glass lives: no fighting; no whining; no days when the complexities or just plain “ick” of family life made all family members wish that they could walk away and be anywhere, anywhere else. . .

The biblical family as portrayed by the gospels is from the beginning touchingly, and I would say, affirmingly close to our own: love and conflict, support and, well, all the not-so-good pressure family can bring to bear. There are in the gospels positive images of family. We see Joseph and Mary standing by each other despite all the complications of their relationship, Joseph packs up Mary and the baby under cover of darkness and flees Judea and Herod’s edict to kill all boy children under age two. They mov to Egypt for we don’t know how long, as refugees if you will, strangers in a strange land. And these were not sophisticated people. Imagine the disruption, the confusion, the fear. But off they went for years probably, because that’s what you do because you are family and it will save your child.

We assume that Joseph died somewhere before Jesus’ public ministry began because Joseph disappears from the biblical narrative. Nothing is said, there’s really nothing even in the apocryphal traditions about how or when Joseph died—although interestingly, in the old tradition, Joseph is named the patron saint of the dying. But Mary, Jesus’ mother, we see over and over in the gospels, most poignantly, in a tribute to the wonderful awful ties that bind, we see her at the foot of the cross when Jesus was executed, an act of love and bravery for her on oh-so-many levels. These are the stories of family that speak of the strong connection between parent and child, a love that holds on even when that holding is almost impossible to bear, the foundational love that inspired and continues to inspire so many of our images of God to be familial.

And then there are the other stories. Like today’s story where Jesus at age 12 drives his parents crazy, then dismisses his actions with a coolness and self-centeredness that gives any parent the

shudders. I read one Jewish commentary on this story this week, and the Jewish scholar made much of the fact that Jesus was 12 when this event happened. From earliest biblical times, the Jewish age of maturity, or responsibility for boys is age 13. By the way, for girls it's age 12—go figure! But, the rabbi commented, first, as a 12 year old, it would have been Jesus' responsibility to be obedient to Mary and Joseph, but also, as a boy under 13, God would not hold the boy accountable for his disrespect of his earthly parents. Interesting.

But this is not the only story that shows the less wonderful side of family life. In the gospels we see times when Mary and Jesus' brothers try to dissuade him from his path of ministry because it is too dangerous. Do we know anything about parents interfering in their adult children's lives? And on two occasions, Jesus is told that his mother and brothers are outside where he is teaching, looking for him, and he responds: "Who are my family, my mother and brothers. It is those who do the will of God." Messiah or not, that would have been hard for a mother or a sibling to hear.

My point here is simple: that the image of family portrayed in the gospels of the holiest of holy families is not the first-century version of Ozzie and Harriet. Family there, as for us, is about love and pain, about holding on and letting go, and not always knowing when to do which, and not always doing it particularly well or with great grace. Isn't that helpful to you: that it's not just us who sometimes have such a difficult time with this web of relationship that is the center of our lives? Just in the last week I have talked with some shirttail cousins who are frantic over their 17 year old daughter who is engaging in some pretty potentially dangerous behaviors. At this point, they've tried everything in the book, and in their words, "haven't a clue every day whether they're making things better or worse." And then there's my twenty-something friend whose parents are still trying to control him some of the time as if he were 14. And the mother whose child's marriage is in trouble, and she doesn't know what, if anything she can do to help. Where is the line between helping and meddling?

Does any of this sound familiar to you? Parents and children, children and parents, and one can go on from there to partners, siblings, extended family, even families of choice. All these form the web of relationships that sustains us and drives us crazy, sometimes both at once. And yet the Bible tells us that from the beginning of creation, God placed us in families deliberately. God made us as family creatures. Why?

I have a friend who describes family life as creating, then tending, then mending, then tending again, and mending again, creating more and being always ready to tend and mend with that lot too. The hard thing about family is that you're stuck with it for life: with your daughter who always pushes your buttons, and your father who can be alternately wonderful and obtuse as a board, and crazy Uncle Albert, and your brother whose drinking worries you. The wonderful thing about family is that you're stuck with it for life and so you will be given opportunity after opportunity to mend and tend, and change, and try to make whole what before was broken.

Excluding severely dysfunctional families, family is where we learn the skills and emotional resilience to do most of what we have to do in the world. Life is always about holding on and letting go, and trying to decide which is most appropriate at any given time. In all our occupations and relationships, we create and tend and mend over and over again. Family is important. Family is powerful. Family is our teacher, for good or ill.

I'm sure many of you have spent this Christmas holiday with family members. I'll bet for most of you the time spent was not always perfect. Even in my perfect family with my perfect daughters, there was some discord around the Christmas dinner table. But we recovered and went on. Mostly, that's what families do. So this morning I thank God for a scripture that tells the truth, not some glossed up, never-to-be-matched image of what family life should be. I give thanks for my family and all the families of the earth. And I pray that all of us may get better at holding on and letting go, at creating and tending and mending, in all the parts and places of our lives. Thanks be to God. Amen.