

“Bringing Up God’s Son”

Luke 2:41-52

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We talk about how time always seems to be moving faster, but time moves so fast in the story of Jesus' life we are liable to get whiplash. It was just two days ago that we were celebrating the birth of the baby Jesus and today we are reading about him as a bright, surly, independent preteen. We are still in the Christmas season, indeed this is only the third day of Christmas, but Jesus has transformed before our eyes. I imagine that Joseph and Mary have transformed too. The young, naïve, hopeful new parents we saw on Christmas morning have wizened over the first twelve years of Jesus' life. He may have been the son of God, but as a human little boy you can bet there were scraped knees, temper tantrums, and battles at bedtime that resulted in a Mary and Joseph who experienced tears, heartache, compromise, a whole lot of learning and even more joy than they imagined when they first gazed upon their newborn child in the manger.

If Christmas is about the birth of Jesus, today, two days after Christmas, is more about Mary and Joseph. It is actually its own holiday! Today is a liturgical holiday known as the Feast of the Holy Family. The Feast of the Holy Family is a day that celebrates the relationships between Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, but it is also a day that sets them up as the ideal model for all families. Whether your family is two moms with an only child, a dad and a step mom with six kids between you, grandparents raising their grandchildren, foster parents who raise numerous kids over the years, or if you're like me and just raising fur babies, using the Holy Family as your model is a bit intimidating. After all, who among us is going to raise a child who turns out to be God?

But the Feast of the Holy Family is not a day that is celebrated at the height of Jesus's adult ministry when he is his most successful – we're not there yet! This is a day that only occurs when Jesus is twelve years old, and their family appears to be surprisingly normal. They have taken a family trip during Passover, and much like our own family vacations, something went wrong. Mary and Joseph forgot about their son. Worse: they lost God's son! If that's the Holy Family we're supposed to be like then I think we're all covered.

Who hasn't lost someone they were supposed to be caring for? An acquaintance of mine recently told me about how her and her husband didn't have their first child until they were 44 years old. They were so used to their adult lifestyle as it had been for the last 20 years that one morning they each got in their cars and left for work, assuming the other one was taking care of their son. Luckily, the mother didn't get too far down the street before she realized she was on baby duty. When she ran back into the house, her son was happily sitting in his high chair, unaware that he had been left behind. Every parent makes mistakes, even Mary and Joseph. The day chosen in honor of the Holy Family seems to not only recognize that, but celebrate it.

What is most remarkable about this story, the sole glimpse we have into Jesus' childhood, is exactly how human of a story it is. Every other Sunday, when we talk about Jesus we even talk about the anticipation and wonder of a newborn baby, or we talk about the profound ministry of justice and discipleship that Jesus engaged in. This is the only in-between we have. If we refer to the newborn baby Jesus as fully human, and the adult prophet as Holy, this twelve-year-old Jesus is something in between, both human and Holy. It's a beautiful moment, and one that is made all the more beautiful by the interactions with his parents – them trying to both understand their son but also teach him what it means to obey his parents and be a part of their family.

When I think about this story and this moment in their family life being the model we are supposed to strive for in our own families, I am grateful. In this story, there is confusion and fear

and panic as Mary and Joseph search for Jesus. There is relief and love and gentle scolding when they find him. But there is a third thing which is the crux of this story: what unfolds is Jesus stepping into the role that he will soon hold, that one of a wise leader, prophet and Messiah, and we see Mary and Joseph, even as they do not fully understand what this means or what is to come, embrace him, accept him, and encourage him. They meet him where he is and they take seriously what he is saying, even as a twelve year old.

So for me, the model of the ideal family that comes from this Holy Family is one where we help each other grow into the people we are meant to be, even when that might be something different from ourselves. Mary and Joseph didn't know why Jesus would have stayed back in the temple. They didn't know why he would have been asking questions of the elders and priests. That wasn't something they had taught him to do – was something that came as a surprise to them. But when it happened, they asked him about it and more importantly, they listened to what he told them. Even as a young child, they let him explain himself. I love that in the scripture it says that even as they didn't full understand him, Mary “treasured all of these things in her heart.” It means she respected her son enough to truly consider his experience and perspective. She valued what she said and remembered it, knowing that if it was important to him it should be important for her as his mother to remember it.

Mary teaches us to listen to our loved ones. To hear their experiences and their interests and their beliefs and treat them with respect, even when they diverge from our own. The model the Holy Family offers us is one where families are diverse and where people are encouraged to be themselves, even when it is different from the norm.

As I've been thinking about this story, it reminded me of one of my friends who comes from a family that has three generations of CIA members. If you're not in the CIA, you involved in some other aspect of the military, or you are married to a military officer. The CIA is so

prominent that they casually call it the family business. My friend's parents groomed her to join the family business. They were shocked when she decided to go to seminary to become a minister instead. They were a religious family, but they never considered that could be something you did with your life outside of Sunday morning. They had a hard time adjusting, but eventually became her biggest champions and supporters.

On this Feast of the Holy Family, we are reminded that not all of us are cut from the same mold as the people around us. We are reminded that even though we are quick to find similarities between ourselves and the people we love, more often than not we are different from each other. Those differences can be celebrated. When the CIA raises a minister, that's okay. If the daughter of an engineer turns into a poet, it's a blessing from God. If you love summer weather and your best friend loves winter, you'll still be able to get together in the spring. It is always okay to have hopes and dreams for the people in our lives, but it is also important to give people space to create their own hopes and dreams. It's still Christmas – we're only a third of the way through it, so if you are looking for a last minute Christmas gift to give someone, look no further than the one Mary and Joseph gave to Jesus when he was young: the gift of listening to him and respecting him even when they didn't understand him. Amen.