

# First Sunday after Christmas

## THE MAKING OF A HOLY FAMILY

Luke 2:41-52

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By Steven E. Albertin

41Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. 42And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. 43When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. 44Assuming 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. 45When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. 46After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. 48When his parents saw him they were astonished; and 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." 49He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" 50But they did not understand what he said to them. 51Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

52And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

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## DIAGNOSIS: Unhealthy Families

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) :** *Family Conflict*

The older I get, the clearer it has become. There is no such thing as a healthy family. All families are more or less dysfunctional. All families are to varying degrees unhealthy. And the first signs of such dysfunction usually appear in times of family conflict. Usually the conflict is the collision of conflicting values and beliefs.

At the center of today's Gospel is a family conflict. It is a collision between Jesus' emerging sense of vocation and his parents' expectations of how a twelve year old ought to behave. It is no accident that this conflict takes place at what resembles Jesus' bar mitzvah and at the time of the Passover festival in Jerusalem. This is more than just a case of teenage rebellion. Jesus' emerging sense of vocation and identity is already putting him at odds with the sacred laws and traditions not only of his "people" and his parents, but with God.

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) :** *Anxious Parents*

Like any loving parents, Mary and Joseph were disturbed and anxious (v. 48) at Jesus' rebellious behavior. After their frantic three-day search they finally discovered Jesus in (of all places!) the temple. They demanded an explanation and expected obedience.

Like all of us, when the foundations of our lives, those things we thought we could always count on, like family and religious tradition and ritual, begin to crumble, we scramble to defend them. But our frantic efforts to defend the status quo and maintain tradition betray the fear, worry, and anxiety lurking in our hearts. Who and what do we really trust? Is it God or our own manageable world that we can control and manipulate for our own peace and security? I suspect it is more that latter than the former. Like Mary and Joseph our distress with our

rebellious and disobedient children may say just as much about us and our misguided priorities and our misplaced values (and gods?) as it does about our children and the health of our families. The picture isn't pretty. And it only gets worse.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) :** *Broken Families*

Mary and Joseph finally discovered Jesus in the temple wowing the teachers and the other religious experts gathered there to hear "his understanding and answers" (v. 47). Initially Jesus' parents may have been relieved to have found him, but ultimately it must have troubled them deeply. If he had simply been carousing with other teenaged boys in the typically unsavory ways and places that you would expect from such hormone-challenged adolescents, it could have been simply explained with: "Well, you know, boys will be boys!" Mary and Joseph could have simply asserted their legitimate parental authority and affirmed the traditional and godly order of life.

But not in this case! Jesus declares his loyalty to another family, to a different Father, to a higher authority. "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (v. 49). Or, as in some translations: "Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?"

Here Mary and Joseph had been trying to do their best and follow all the divinely authorized rules and traditions and most of all to be good and responsible parents (!), and it was not good enough! Their stunned silence was a tacit admission of their failure. They were convinced that they had done their best, and they were still rejected, not only by their "rebellious" son, if his claims were true, but by Almighty God Himself!

What appeared to be a family reunion in the Temple was in fact a family break-up. Mary and Joseph's attempt to hold on to their parental authority puts them at odds not only with their son but

with God! They fail to perceive the marvelous and amazing business that the Father is doing through his Son and therefore are having a spat not just with their mouthy teenager but with Almighty God. That is indeed dangerous and deadly. Who do you think is going to come out ahead in this family conflict? It isn't Mary and Joseph!

This family is in trouble, if not crumbling in (of all places) the Temple in Jerusalem. How ironic! A religious disagreement leads to a family conflict, a divinely authorized one yet!

## **PROGNOSIS: Healthy Families**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) :** *“My Father’s Business”*

But there is an even bigger surprise here. Despite this act of defiance and Jesus’ gentle rebuke of his parents, he does return home to Nazareth with them and is compliant, submissive, and obedient. Why? Could it be that this is one more signal of the meaning of Jesus’ birth as the Immanuel, of God coming to be with us, literally to be one of us? Even though this incident clearly revealed Jesus’ growing self-understanding as the Son of God, being the Son of God did not mean that he would flee the dirt and grime of ordinary human life.

On the contrary, being the Immanuel, “God with us,” meant that Jesus chose to walk with Mary and Joseph and all the far-from-perfect parents of this world, joining himself to the many imperfections of human life, including our sin, and carry them all the way to the cross. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus will only make one more trip to Jerusalem. On that second trip he will suffer the consequences of his return to Nazareth with his parents—of his choice to become one with his parents and us. He will be arrested, crucified, and die.

At the cross Jesus suffered the consequences of his loving

choice to join all of broken humanity. There he suffered the ultimate fate of his holy mission. There he exchanged his holiness and righteousness for our failed attempts at parenting and passing on the faith to our children. Everything that is wrong and broken with our unfulfilled lives he carried to the cross and suffered the fate we deserve. But that is not all there is. "On the third day" he was raised by his Father from the dead, triumphant. Mission accomplished. The mission he began to explore that day in the temple in his "Father's house," at the tender age of twelve, was finally finished. His "Father's business" of forgiving sinners, which would be at the center of his adult life, was vindicated. The consequences of that day in the temple, when Jesus defied his parents and claimed to be part of something that contradicted not only the law of his people but the law of God, reached its climax on Jesus' return trip to Jerusalem. There on the cross, and then at the resurrection, Jesus fulfilled his "Father's business" and his mission, so that the church today can say to disappointed and imperfect parents, "Your sins are forgiven."

**Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) :** *Matters of the Heart*

Did Mary and Joseph ever "get it"? Luke recounts that "his mother treasured all these things in her heart" (v. 51), which sounds a lot like Mary's response to the amazing events of the night when Jesus was born (2:19). It also reminds us of the trusting response of Mary to the startling announcement of the angel Gabriel when, despite her initial anxiety, she believed that she was indeed favored in the eyes of God. In spite of all the scandalous gossip her unusual pregnancy was sure to create on the streets of Nazareth, she still believed in her heart that she was "the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (1:38).

It is the transformation of the human heart with which the

mission of Jesus is ultimately concerned. That is why he was in his Father's house that day during Passover in Jerusalem. That is his Father's business . . . to make it possible for anxious, troubled and imperfect parents to be free from their sin and to trust the amazing mercy of God. And, apparently, after this tumultuous trip to Jerusalem, Mary and Joseph quietly went about their lives back in Nazareth for the next 18 years, raising their son to adulthood. These parents—who were not only confused about their role as parents, but their status before God—had their hearts transformed by their son, who was, more importantly, their Savior. Jesus had criticized them, and they may well have expected him to distance himself from them, (maybe even to refuse to go home with them), because his real parentage lie elsewhere; instead he manifest the surprising and unexpected mercy of God by obediently returning home with them, without so much as a complaint. This is the divine love that Mary must have “treasured in her heart.” (v. 51).

#### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) :** *Making a Holy Family*

It is this divine mercy; it is this exchanging of the forgiveness of sins among family members, which finally makes families “holy.” It is the holy love of Jesus that promises to give parents the courage and the strength to carry out their vocation. It is the mercy of the heavenly Father, offered “in the name of Jesus,” that promises to give families the power to resist the skewed and perverse values of so much of family life today.

If parenting is raising your children to leave home to live lives of their own, then Christian parenting is also raising your children to leave home. But leaving home means learning to trust God and his mercy. Leaving home means trusting your Father in heaven more than anything else. Leaving home means trusting your heavenly Father in preparation for that day when you will

go to your heavenly home forever.

Such parenting is not destructive of family life. If anything it helps the development of a healthy family life where parents and children love and care for one another. It was not destructive of family life for Mary, Joseph and Jesus. It is no accident that the New Testament is totally silent concerning the events of their family life from Jesus' birth until Jesus' adulthood, except for the incident reported in today's Gospel. The New Testament is silent because their family life was so ordinary, so mundane, and so down-to-earth, just like the daily routine of our family lives, that it did not warrant any special reporting.

But this silence is important! Why? Because that is exactly the point! It is in the ordinary routines of daily life that families are made holy. It is in ordinary routines of the every day that the business of our Father gets done. It is there, just like in the families of Mary, Joseph and Jesus (and Hannah and Samuel in today's First Reading), that people are loved, cared for, and forgiven. It might seem ordinary and unspectacular, but it is at the heart of a holy family.