

Family Drama

from the pulpit of
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Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
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Colossians 3:12-17

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or

deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Luke 2:41-52

Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy 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 among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When 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." He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must 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 was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

Whether it was intentional or not, our lectionary readings have given us a scene from Scripture aptly fitting for this first Sunday after Christmas.

After the high holy day is over, and the massive crowds have left, and the temple and sanctuary alike are littered with candle wax and glitter. In their wake, there's plenty of seating now, and a kind of quiet peace settles in after the busyness of the season has passed.

And so with beautiful irony, we hear these verses in Luke's gospel that highlight a rather peculiar story about the adolescent Savior and his parents.

It's a strange closing to the narrative of the Christ child. After all, these two very long chapters featured no fewer than three angelic visitations, miraculous pronouncements, lyrical refrains, and above all the birth of the Savior of the world.

Yet as it all comes in for a conclusion in Luke's gospel, we have a story as mundane, as utterly earthy and as simple as they come. A lost kid. Anxious parents. And a frantic search.

What started with a choir of the Heavenly Host in the maternity ward at Bryn Mawr Hospital, ends with a sweating mom and dad, standing over in Witherspoon Parlor, trying to contain their obvious panic, when they finally find their curious son chatting it up with thoughtful and gentle seasoned members of the church.

Losing someone is terrifying.

Feeling lost though can be just as terrifying.

I was only five years old the first time I got good and lost. Arriving at the mall with a relative one afternoon, we made our way into one of the major department stores there.

And given my age and attention span, I had no plans to stand quietly in the women's dress section. So off I went, crawling through one of the rounder clothing racks.

But when I came out the other side, my relative was nowhere in sight. Thinking she was just around the corner, I calmly made my way into the main thoroughfare to see where she had gone.

But I couldn't see her. I couldn't even see her massive beehive hairdo, which after many years had grown to such a curious size one could spot it from long distances.

And that's when fear seized me. I was lost. Panicking, I tried to play it cool. Well, as cool as a five-year-old can play it. I pretended I was in a game, racing around the first floor, when in reality I was racing to be found. But soon a store employee spotted me. "Are you lost?" she asked me, more as a declarative than a question.

Of course, I was lost! She knew it just by looking at my face. I imagined being left there after hours, when everyone went home and the lights were turned off. If I were left in a toy store overnight, that would've been one thing. But being abandoned until dawn in a grown-up's department store was not my idea of kindergarten freedom.

In any event, they paged my good-for-nothing relative over the loudspeakers. Eventually she found me, reunited at the guest services desk on the second floor.

The entire experience only lasted perhaps 20 minutes, but to a five-year-old it might as well have been weeks. She told me matter-of-factly that she had left me on purpose, to teach me a lesson about personal responsibility. And given her own charming nature, I wouldn't have put it past her.

But the look on her face told me a different story. I think she was quite relieved to see me. I even suspect she was afraid too; scared that I was lost. And underneath her snarky breath, I smelled just a hint of joy at our reunion.

Can we imagine how Mary felt when she knew her son was missing? Now if we are thinking to ourselves, "how can any competent parent lose their

own child?” It would have been quite easy to have made the mistake in this moment. At twelve years old, now considered a man by Jewish law, this would have been Jesus’ first trip to the Temple for Passover.

In those days, a traveling caravan would have split into two groups. The women would head out first, and the men would leave later in the day. Assuming the men would move at a faster rate, the two groups would reach camp at the same time around nightfall. It’s possible to assume that Mary thought Jesus was with Joseph, and Joseph thought he was probably with Mary.

And then they reach camp, but they have yet to run into their son.

“Cousin Rachel, do you know where Jesus is?”

“No Mary, I haven’t seen him since we were in the city.” “How about you David, have you seen our boy?”

“I’m sorry to say I haven’t, Joseph.”

“Amos, do happen to know where our son is?”

“I don’t believe I do, Mary, where was the last place you saw him?”

Panic starts to creep in. We can feel it, can’t we?

And in the dark, they discovered he wasn’t there at all.

So when daylight breaks, they head back to Jerusalem. It’s probably more accurate to say they raced back. The text says it took them three whole days to find him. Three days; an allusion back to Jonah in the belly of the fish, and forward to Jesus being lost to death, both for three days.

The whole image is one of hopelessness. What do we do when all seems lost?

And when they finally find him, in the Temple Court, sitting at the feet of the teachers, Mary is furious, speaking to Jesus as only a momma can speak to her own children. “Child,” she says, “why have you done this to us? Look here, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.”

Or as my mother would have said then, “Frank, what were you thinking? You have embarrassed the Sheol out of us.” Sheol being the Hebrew word for Hell.

It’s this wonderful scene of family drama. Revealing that even the Holy Family has it. But of course, this scene is more than that. Because how Jesus responds to his rightly worried mother points us to a kind of theological truth that we would do well to sit with.

Jesus says to her, “Why were you searching for me? Didn’t you know I’d be here?”

Scottish New Testament Scholar, William Barclay, noted, “We must not think of it as a scene where a precocious boy was dominating a crowd of his seniors. [The expression] *hearing and asking questions* is the regular Jewish phrase for a student learning from his teachers. Jesus was listening to the discussions and eagerly searching for knowledge like an avid student.”¹

Jesus is modeling a kind of intellectual curiosity about faith and practice for us. Not even the Messiah knows all there is to know at twelve years old. He is hungry to be around the kinds of people whose years and experiences and education have brought them wisdom. But the rather candid acknowledgment that even Jesus had to mature can be startling to our religious sensibilities. So what do we do with that?

How does it change our understanding of the Christian faith when we realize that Jesus’ actions illustrate both a desperate need for community and an internal desire, hardwired in the human spirit, to seek after wisdom from others, within and beyond our families of origin?

Retired Presbyterian minister, Michael Lindvall, writes, “That Jesus ‘grew in wisdom’ suggests a Christology that confesses Jesus’ full humanity,

¹ William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series: The Gospel of Luke*. Revised ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975) p.29.

and an anthropology that confesses that we, like him, are called to ‘grow in wisdom.’”²

And Mary, pondering these things in her heart, realizes that there will be things that she and Joseph will be unable to teach their son. He will need to go out into the world to experience them for himself.

My hunch is this story offers up more than one lesson for us. Like the parable of the Prodigal Son, this may be a story for parents, who wonder if their children will ever get their act together and find their way.

I know some who worry that they’ve failed as parents because their children seem to have “gotten good and lost” and wandered far from home in one way or another. “Train up a child the way they shall go,” the old proverb reminds us, “and when they are old they will not depart from it.”

But I like the way *The Message* Bible translates it: “Point your kids in the right direction—when they’re old, they won’t be lost.”

When life gets complicated for any of our wayward children, they may well remember what they heard here last Monday night. They may look up from wherever they are and see the star that still hovers over Bethlehem. Which is why we promise as a congregation to keep telling them the Good News until it becomes their own.

No child is ever lost to God.

This story also tells us that the call to follow Jesus is the call to a love affair with learning in community, with growing, with being challenged and changed, and formed and reformed into the person God is calling me, and you, and all of us, to be. It is not an overnight process. In fact, I suspect it takes a lifetime.

² Michael L. Lindvall, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, Year C, Volume 1. (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018) p.125.

The great reformer, Martin Luther, made the same point writing, “This life...is not godliness but the process of becoming godly, not health, but getting well, not being, but becoming...We are not yet what we shall be,” Luther writes, “but we are on the way.”³

Which is another way of saying we are always under construction. Never quite finished, but working on it.

This seems to be the messy truth of the incarnation. The birth of the Savior means more than an unbelievable seasonal sale at Neiman Marcus. Or a perfect holiday meal, or an airbrushed family photo.

The enfleshing of divinity by God in Christ means that our less than perfect families and stories and lives continue to be reconciled and redeemed by the One who has come to save us from within them.

It really shouldn't surprise us that history's most important childhood narrative begins with singing angels and ends with frantic and frustrated parents in a scene of family drama. That's pretty much described my life since our first child was born.

But there is also holiness there. Even in the frustration. Even in the drama. More holiness than we can ever imagine. This story invites us to grow, and listen, and learn, and seek wisdom, and struggle together; with Mary and Joseph and all the rest of our world which yearns for salvation.

And we also invited to rejoice, and give heed to what we sing: That Christ was born, into a family just like our own, for us. And when we remember that, we too might see the star, and find our way home. Amen.

³ Martin Luther, *Career of the Reformer II*, ed. George W. Forell, vol. 32, *Luther's Works* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1958) p.24.