

“A Mother’s Worst Nightmare”

Luke 2:41-52

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There’s one thing the Bible doesn’t talk enough about, and that’s how to parent a teenager. For those of us who’ve raised teenagers, we really wish God would have given a few more instructions. And today’s text is the only time we learn what Jesus was like as an adolescent and quite frankly it doesn’t help much with our parenting skills.

I can’t imagine a worst nightmare than a missing child, but that’s exactly what Mary and Joseph experience. In the great crowds journeying to and from Jerusalem for Passover, their child, Jesus, becomes lost. At first, they assume he’s within the entourage, most of whom were probably relatives of Mary and Joseph. But then they realize he isn’t with them.

We can almost feel their panic--the initial looking ahead, behind, around; the calling of his name, and then the realization that they must have left him behind. Oh the fear, the anger, the exasperation. They turn around and head back the way they came and there after reaching Jerusalem it still takes three more days to find him. And then Jesus doesn’t even say “sorry.” His response is more like, “What’s the big deal, mom and dad, you should have known where I was!” This is not the adolescent behavior we’d all like to see modeled for our children.

This story about Jesus shows his emerging self-identity. He listens as well as talks with the elders. One translation says he “posed questions.” And he knows he’s not quite ready to assume adulthood because the Bible says he returns with his parents to Nazareth and is obedient. But he has tested the waters and has an inkling of his career track.

In Luke’s marvelous manner of writing so that we could grasp the Jesus story, he begins his gospel in the temple, tells this account of Jesus in the temple, and he ends his gospel with the disciples praising God in the temple. And the temple is in Jerusalem where Jesus was carried as an infant for presentation, where now he goes as a young man at the age of emerging adulthood trained in the Torah so that he can pose and ask questions, and where he will journey again near the end of Luke’s account of Jesus life.

And then Mary and Joseph search in Jerusalem for their lost child for three days (2:46). Luke uses the phrase “being lost” like “being dead” and “being found” is like “being made alive.” Near the end of Luke’s gospel Jesus is again missing for three days (24:7) and when he is found, he says “why have you been seeking”. And like Mary is “keeping all the words in her heart (2:51), now the women at the tomb are “remembering his words” (24:8).

Like any excellent teacher Luke has presented the Jesus story in a way we can grasp the meaning of Jesus’ life. In his culture that relied on oral tradition, where most didn’t read or write, this would have been an inspired gift of teaching.

It’s reassuring to know that Jesus survived the teenage years and his mother survived as well. We know this because she returns to Jerusalem much later to watch her son die. It’s also reassuring that Mary and Joseph are not expected to have all the answers. This story reinforces the saying “It takes a village to raise a child.” and in their time the village was the synagogue.

I was pondering this week what I’d write in my 2006 annual report. Do I report on what has been or what might be in the future? Do I celebrate the church’s accomplishments in the year gone or present a vision for the future? The vision I hold in my heart is that we increasingly become a “teaching” church.

I would love it if children would gather here to talk, to learn, to find themselves, and that they would be so engaged they wouldn't want to go home. I'd like to see church as a safe haven so that even if their parents weren't around, they would feel safe and secure. I would love for all of us grownups to intentionally share our unique gifts to bless the children of the church and the children of the surrounding community.

For Jesus the temple was a place of self discovery, of finding himself as Son of God. Could we as church become just such a place. Already we have been this kind of place; yet, perhaps we have a larger calling. Sometimes church's seek their mission in extravagant actions, while neglecting to see what is before their eyes. Like parents who sometimes are great at "doing for others" neglect the children that they've been given to nurture and care for. The real question for us as church is "what is God giving us to do right here, right now?"

The other striking thing about this story is that the temple is a sacred space for asking questions. There are churches where questioning the status quo, the correct doctrines, is not OK. But we in the UCC welcome the questions. It's how we learn and grow. It's how we become closer to God. Allowing for questions, allowing our children and youth to question can cause some anxiety. It feels risky. There's nothing like parenting to make one humble and realize we can't control everything; we can't always keep our children safe; sometimes we may even lose them for a time. I imagine God shares this angst. God does not keep us as puppets on a string, controlled by the hand of the divine. God gives to us as sons and daughters of God the space to find ourselves within the divine realm of possibilities. And if we stumble and fall, if we lose our way, even if we rebel, like the faithful parent, God never gives up, and God's grace is sufficient.

The life of faith is not so much walking the straight and narrow but soaring with the eagles. We were meant to live fully, faithfully, and experience the miracles of God's creation. We were meant to fly. And when we do this surely as a loving parent or a loving Creator, God must smile. And that is when a mother's worst nightmare becomes a mother's greatest joy!