

## **Feast of the Holy Family**

Cycle C, 12.30.18

1 Samuel 1: 20-22, 24-28/1 John 3:1-2, 21-24/  
Luke 2:41-52

### ***A DEFIANT ACT – A DEFINING MOMENT***

I recently received an invitation to a wedding reception following the ceremony to be held here at St. Perpetua. After the information about the time and place, and options for area hotels and gift registry, was a line on the invitation that said: *We kindly request adults over 21 only at the reception.* I showed the invitation to a group of fourth graders from our parish school at a children's liturgy in our chapel. They were none too pleased to think that children would be excluded from a party. They like to party too. Perhaps that was a little what Jesus felt when he and his parents were returning from the Temple feast to make their way back to Nazareth. There were strict social rules governing relationships in that first century world of Jesus' day.

In the caravan leaving Jerusalem for home after celebrating the Passover, Joseph probably sighed when he discovered that Jesus was absent from the company of men. Jesus was twelve years old and the custom was that men and women traveled separately in the caravan. Little boys under twelve traveled with the women. In fact, their whole childhood was spent with the women of the family where they were pampered and spoiled since boys were favored over girls. Then when a boy reached puberty and turned twelve, he would be unceremoniously shoved out of the comfort of the women's world into the harsh and hierarchical men's world.

Seeing that Jesus wasn't with the men, Joseph probably thought: *“Well, he's only twelve. He must be having a tough time making the change; he's still a mama's*

*boy. He ran back to his mother for her comfort. Sure, I'd rather have him here with me, but he's obviously in the caravan with the women and girls.”*

Then consider Mary when she realizes that Jesus is not with her. Perhaps Mary thought: *“He's only twelve, but he considers himself a man now, so he's walking with Joseph.”* She may have proudly if wistfully believed that Jesus had at last cut the apron strings and was with his male relatives, taking part in their conversations, observing the ways of the men who would now be his mentors. It would have been appropriate for a lad his age.



Only after a day's journey, when Jesus couldn't be found among either male or female relatives, did his parents realize that he wasn't with the caravan. Mary and Joseph must have been hurt and confused, and frightened for their son who was going through the turmoil and pain of adolescent changes. I think that it wasn't Mary and Joseph who were the searchers in the story but Jesus himself. He was at an age where he was beginning to strike out on his own, to feel his own identity apart from the family, to struggle with his own meaning and purpose in life. Like your own children and grandchildren who are going to be teenagers, Jesus at twelve was not yet a man, but no longer a child. A rather confusing period for any son or daughter... and for the parents.

While our culture is vastly different than the first-century Mediterranean world of Jesus and his contemporaries, there are certainly parallels that most of us have experienced personally and with your children, especially with regards to faith. After a child has been a part of a group and has successfully enjoyed the company of others, both parents and peers, the coming of adolescence at around the ages of twelve or thirteen, even earlier for some, thrusts the child into a world of searching. These young searchers no longer define themselves according to the group or family norms. "I'll do it my way!" becomes a battle cry. "I don't have to do it if I don't want to!" is a common response to a parent's order. I know from my niece's occasional phone calls seeking consolation and advice for dealing with a teenage son what a challenging task raising teens can be. The hair-thinning that parents of teenagers experience is not entirely a natural process, some of it results from pulling your own hair out wondering what to say or do at those awkward and difficult moments. The beauty and power of the gospel for this Feast of the Holy Family is the opportunity it offers to reflect on the mystery of family life.



Every family and community shares the perplexing, frustrating, demanding challenge that Luke describes in his gospel. Mary and Joseph learned that Jesus was not going along with them every step of the

way. These biblical parents, like all parents, faced the difficult discovery that their child would have to discover his own path in life. No matter what they might hope for him, he did not belong to them.

You may recall the words of the twentieth century artist and author, Kahlil Gibran, and his insightful poem entitled *On Children*:

*Your children are not your children.  
They are the sons and daughters  
of Life's longing for itself.  
They come through you but not from you,  
And though they are with you  
yet they belong not to you.*

*You may give them your love  
but not your thoughts,  
For they have their own thoughts.  
You may house their bodies  
but not their souls,  
For their souls dwell  
in the house of tomorrow,  
which you cannot visit,  
not even in your dreams.*

*You are the bows from which your children  
as living arrows are sent forth.  
The archer sees the mark  
upon the path of the infinite,  
and He bends you with His might  
that His arrows may go swift and far.  
Let your bending in the archer's hand  
be for gladness;  
For even as He loves the arrow that flies,  
so He loves also the bow that is stable.*

Today's feast reminds us that love is rooted in profound reverence for the mystery of the "other," especially the freedom of the other person. Parents come to own the desire that the other – be it son or daughter, spouse or friend -- will become who they are meant to be rather than what we would have them to be. I remember to

this day the wise words of my mother during a time of tension and personal struggle as a teenager entering adulthood, when she said: *Don't let your father's and my limitations hamper your own growth and the things you must do.* Somehow, Mary and Joseph must have comprehended that wisdom and understood their son. According to Luke's gospel, they didn't return to search all over Jerusalem, checking out the marketplaces and recreation spots that might have interested a budding adolescent. They went to the Temple and found their curious child listening to the scholars who spoke of the things of God.

The picture painted by the Christian imagination fails to tell us that although Jesus, Mary and Joseph started out as holy individuals, becoming a holy family took hard work. Together they had to grow through just such painful experiences as we hear today. In all families, communications are sometimes clumsy. Tensions arise and have to be resolved through listening and understanding that deepen with practice.



A “holy” family is a dynamic school of lifelong learning. Then, the only thing that parents can do is to do what Mary did - ponder the mystery, and pray that their child will continue to grow in wisdom, maturity and favor among others and before God. In order to help us weather the storms of family living at all ages – whether parents or grandparents, brothers or sisters, sons or daughters, we need to believe what St. John says in his letter which we heard today: *See what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God. And so we are!* That love, which transcends our human love, holds true for twelve year-olds, as well as for their parents and for all of us.



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