

**Homily - Rev. Kevin V. Madigan**  
**Church of St. Thomas More, NYC**  
**December 30, 2018**  
**Solemnity of the Holy Family Luke 2: 41-52**

“I thought He was with you.” “I thought He was with you.” Or so we can imagine the conversation between Mary and Joseph, as it might be depicted in our reading from the Gospel of St. Luke. Today Child Protection Services would be called in to check on what kind of parental supervision there is in this home. This seems to be a case of pushing “free-range parenting” to an extreme. Of course in first century Israel, a whole clan might take the pilgrim-journey to Jerusalem, so it is quite understandable to think that the Child could be with some other members of the extended family. The real question is who is it that is lost? And, as the story unfolds, Jesus is not lost at all. He is precisely where He is supposed to be.

In the Gospel Mary and Joseph are presented not as typical parents, but as archetypal parents. They are the embodiment of certain themes, patterns, and ideals that are, or should be, lived out in every family. In that sense they are “larger-than-life” depictions of what we can and should be. Each has received word—Mary from the message of an angel and Joseph in a dream—that the Child to be born to them is a “Child of God.” They are aware that their child is unique, like no one who has ever been or will ever be. They are aware that this Child will have a destiny, a life separate and apart from their own. So, when the Child arrives, their lives will be caught up in encouraging Him in the unfolding of that destiny, in serving His needs and not just their own.

As archetypal parents, Mary and Joseph remind every parent that their child, too, is a “child of God,” certainly not in the unique manner of Jesus, but in the sense that every child is a gift and a responsibility--not a possession or a piece of protoplasm to be molded in the parents’ own image. Every child is unique with his or her own feelings, emotions and dreams. Their child is not simply an extension of the parents or a substitute for their own failed ambitions, or any other purpose whereby they use the child for their own ends--even if for desires and motivations often hidden from themselves. To make a child into something or someone that he or she is not is to kill that child’s vitality and uniqueness.

We are quick to recognize and condemn the blatant forms of child abuse, physical or sexual, that are publicized in the media, but there are more subtle forms of abuse as well, albeit more psychological in nature, wherein children are not truly respected for who they are, but are forced to meet a parent’s needs; where they are

not allowed to feel what they feel, or know what they know, or say yes when they mean yes, and no when they mean no, but are forced to follow a script that is laid out for them in advance. One other form of abuse is the situation wherein parents refuse to confront their own chemical or emotional addictions, and in the process transform the home, which should be a place of security and calm, a "haven in a heartless world," as some have called it, into a place of chaos, confusion, distrust and disappointment. If a parent truly believed their child to be a precious "child of God" would they subject him or her to an environment that risks destroying the soul, the vitality of that child?

Today's passage ends with the words, "Jesus advanced in wisdom and age and favor before God and man." It bespeaks a process of growth, of development, of a coming to awareness of precisely who He is that was true of Jesus, but is true of every child as well. When we consider the kind of person Jesus turned out to be, when we remember Him as one who evidenced the centrality of love in all He said and did, then His upbringing in the home with Joseph and Mary must have played a very important role in how He came to understand the very different ways that love can shape one's life. It must have been within an atmosphere of selfless love that He learned to be as selfless in His love for others. The ability that Jesus possessed to point out the hypocrisy and intolerance of His day, no doubt sprang from those early years when He learned from Mary and Joseph to distinguish the fake and the phony from the real thing. Could the centrality that Jesus gave to the "meal," to simply sharing food with people as He shared with them the "good news" of God's love, could this have come from the family meals in Nazareth? Eating together as a family should never be underestimated or taken for granted. Studies have shown that there is a correlation between frequent family meals and a lower rate of teenage alcoholism and drug addiction. Each sharing with the other what their day was like can be as nourishing as the food put in one's mouth. Nothing spectacular, but something crucially important. In the hectic pace of life, when everybody has so much going on, today it requires real discipline to schedule in frequent family meals.

Love is the fundamental human and family value that is caught, not taught. A child cannot be taught to be loving, neither by being beaten or by being nagged. A child who is preached at learns only how to preach at others; a child who is beaten learns only to beat others. But a child who is respected learns respect; a child who is cared for learns to care for those weaker than herself or himself; and a child who is loved for who and what they are learns to accept others for who and what they are. Such a child does not need to have their head crammed with moral principles, or their behavior constrained by an excess of rules and regulations. This is not to deny the need for parental guidance and intervention as required. But when the genuine

experience of love is lacking, all the pedagogical tools in the world will not compensate for that which the child has a natural appetite, viz., a need for love.

Now to return to the scene in today's Gospel. Mary and Joseph discover Jesus, twelve years old, not yet bar-mitvahed, in the midst of the rabbis. He is presented as having the confidence, the self-assurance, to question those much more learned than He in matters theological. When asked as to why He had gone off on His own, He says, "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's House?" He is where He is supposed to be. He is not lost at all. Jesus is shown here as asking questions; that is presented as a good thing. This can be a lesson to us too that our questions about our faith can be as important as the answers. And, if we are comfortable in our faith, as was Jesus at home in "His Father's House," then we can pose those questions with the confidence that they will eventually lead us to God, the Source of all truth.

Jesus is shown as being aware that He has a calling higher than that of taking up the family carpentry business in Nazareth. We might say He is precocious, that He has "a wisdom beyond His years," but St. Luke is pointing to something more. Luke is indicating Jesus' destiny. St. Luke is a rather skillful writer in the composition of his gospel, and here he includes a detail that could easily go unnoticed. He remarks that Mary and Joseph find Jesus after looking for Him "for three days." This is a subtle reference to the "third day," Easter Sunday, when Jesus is returned to His disciples, after His crucifixion. After He had seemingly been lost to them, He is given back to them. Today's story is like the overture of a symphony or an opera, a hint of a theme to be played out in greater scale in what follows.

Today's feast of the Holy Family is given to us to remind us of the essential truth that the family is the foundation of every society. Good families produce good societies, and bad ones produce bad societies. So, the family needs to be protected and strengthened. It is done so on the pattern of the love shown in the home of Nazareth. Let us pray that we can model that love in our own homes.