

Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when Jesus 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.



The story of young Jesus, separated from his parents in the city of Jerusalem (for three days!) most always evokes parallel stories from parents and children alike. I can say that from personal experience, as a parent.

It was more than twenty years ago now that it happened, but I remember it like yesterday. My Mom and I had Matt and Grace in NYC, with Grace still in a stroller and Matt about 5 years old. It was after Christmas, and we went into the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as I remember, to get out of the cold. In the busy museum we all got into an elevator and were quickly pushed to the back. We went up a few floors, the doors opened, and lots of folks got off, including little Matt, who was accidentally whisked out by the crush of the crowd.

I tried to grab him but was too late. The door closed, with us standing in the back of the elevator, looking at him, just standing there, leaving my Mother and I wondering what we could do, and equally important, wondering what Matt would do!

Now, of course elevators need to go all the way up before they come back down, so we went to the top floor, all the while worried, really concerned as to what he was going to do. Would he take the next elevator to the top to meet us there?

Would he wait where he was? What should we do, get off on the top floor or go back down?

I can't remember how we decided to stay on the elevator, maybe it was so crowded we couldn't get off on the top floor. So we went back down to the floor where we hoped to find Matt.

We held our breath when the door opened- what would we do if he wasn't there?

The door opened. There he stood, tall and proud. "I just stood here", he said, "I knew this was the right thing to do."

How right he was, and how happy we were!

(But again, I still remember it like it was yesterday!)

Our family stories stick with us and influence us far more than we often realize or acknowledge. So the Bible story of Jesus' family is both familiar and turns on its head our notion of the perfect family.

This account of Jesus lost and then found by his parents serves also a 'prefiguring event' in Luke's Gospel. It foreshadows the man Jesus who is lost and then found by his disciples in surprisingly similar ways.

Later in the course of the Gospel, Jesus goes to Jerusalem for the Passover, when he there brings worry and alarm to his disciples. Later there is another finding that happens



after three days, and this time, the disciples are confronted with their own lack of understanding.

“Did you not understand that I must be about my Father’s business”, and “Did you not know it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer these things in order to enter his glory?” These stories are not exact parallels, but they relate to each other enough to deliver the news that history is not on the loose, that something else is in the works in human life on this planet other than out-of control randomness or even foreboding destructiveness.

A key factor in this particular story is the wisdom of the boy Jesus and his commitment to his Father’s business that overrides and corrects the fear and anxiety of his parents.

Joseph and Mary were afraid for their son. They were later amazed at what they saw; young Jesus, going toe-to-toe with the teachers. What they witnessed indicates that Jesus’ wisdom doesn’t come through normal channels. He has a direct knowledge of God. He is holy in a special way.

This happens throughout the Bible in various ways. If a barren woman bears a son, if a small boy kills a Goliath, if someone makes water spring from a rock, if manna falls from heaven, the conclusion has to be that there is something more than human talent and ability involved.

The extraordinary wisdom that the young boy Jesus shows is a sign of the intimacy with God that makes the Temple a natural home for him, and this intimacy shows Jesus the path he is to follow.

It is a path his heavenly Father has ordained for him, even if his earthly parents do not fully understand. Later, the disciples will also not fully understand the path Jesus chooses at the height of his ministry, when he turns toward Jerusalem, rather than returning to the safe shores of Galilee or to his home in Nazareth.

In his response to his parents' questions to him after they find him, "Why have you treated us like this, we've been searching with great anxiety?" Jesus responds with a message that God's plan takes priority over all else. No matter how inscrutable God's plan may appear, there is deep wisdom under the surface, often beyond our present recognition. The initial fear we bring to an unexpected circumstance can turn into amazement when we see God's gracious hand working it out. No matter how inscrutable God's plan is to us, no matter how impenetrable or incomprehensible it may be for us to understand a life situation, underneath it all is God's grace and presence; and it most often unveils itself in the context of family life.



Here's a story. In one of my clergy colleague conversations, someone once mentioned a gimmick that he heard a priest use once in a sermon.

The priest entered the pulpit with a small trophy and told the congregation that he and the church staff had an announcement to make. They had talked about all the families in the parish and decided to make an award to the family that most resembled the holy family.

When I asked what happened next, it got interesting. As the story goes, when the priest made this unexpected announcement, the church got dead quiet. The people just stared at the priest with a look that said 'You idiot, what have you done?'

So what was he going after with this stunt? People think that holiness means perfection. No negative feelings, no hurtful words, no stretching the truth, kids always obedient to their parents and parents always understanding their kids. If there is friction, the Perfect Family heals it in a half-hour, like an old TV sit-com. But real family life is far from an easy, simplistic picture. There is always some kind of discord, a lack of communication, mistakes, grudges, passive-aggressive behavior. When judged against the perceived model of perfection we hold, no family is holy. Even Jesus spoke harsh words to his parents and his parents had stern words for him.

So what was the priest after? I had to ask, again...

It was all about disabusing people about the 'holiness is perfection' complex.

I still don't know what to think about the trophy gimmick, but I definitely agree that equating perfection with holiness is an inadequate model of the actual give and take of family life, and in certain circumstances it can even cause harm.

The story of the boy Jesus who is lost and found ends with the simple observation that he grew in **age, wisdom** and **grace**.

These words lead us to where we can find an alternative definition of holiness, better than simply 'perfection.'

With **age** comes the shifting inner and outer changes for new possibilities to occur. What is impossible for the pre-teen child is now possible for the 19 year old, what the young father could not put up with, the older father can accept, what the mother always feared would happen has happened, and now she can accept it. As long as there is time and aging, there will be opportunities of redemption and celebration.



In the gospels, **wisdom** is not esoteric erudition or pie in the sky speculation. It is the knack of keeping the Spirit alive; of the one who builds their house upon rock and not sand, who looks beyond selfish self-destructive behavior, who persists in hope, not as a last ditch effort, but as part of the steady diet of daily living.

And '**grace**' points to a human dynamic that begins on the inside and emerges on the outside with new energy and action. The presence of grace at the center of life means that everyone is capable of surprising actions, anytime. Although families are notorious for putting one another in boxes, the graced center of each person may break out of the box and bring out acts of selflessness and love.

Family holiness is not about perfection. Nor is it about premature judgments of failure or self-congratulatory accolades of success. It is about people living in relationship with one another, recognizing their shared spiritual center, discovering opportunities for their shared spirits to flourish.

Most of all, holiness is a relationship we are invited into by the One who lived for all, died for all, and rose for all of us- those who trust, and even those who do not. For we know that in God's goodness, all who are lost will indeed be found, even those who do not know they are lost, but whose hearts are open to love.

So it is that we are invited to the table this morning, by Mary and Joseph's son, our brother, Lord and friend. In Jesus' name, Amen.