

## **“Perspectives in Parenting”**

Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2:41-52 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might seek to offer your love to ourselves and others, that all might be nurtured and cherished. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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It's a joke, of course. When I titled this sermon “Perspectives in Parenting,” I didn't do it because I am a parenting expert, with all sorts of biblically-based advice on how to raise your offspring. When it comes to parenting, I can merely watch from the outside and sympathize. Speaking of which, there is a lot to sympathize with in the story we just read from Luke.

Four days! He'd been missing for four days! Of course, as with many children who wander off, Jesus didn't realize he was lost; he knew exactly where he was. But can you imagine the anguish Mary & Joseph were going through? Anyone who has traveled with a large group knows how easy it would have been to assume he was around somewhere as they headed home to Nazareth. And they were on foot, so it wasn't like there was an empty seat in the van. But still, to realize that you've left behind your firstborn son! The embarrassment! The worry! The anger! He was, after all, twelve years old, and plenty mature enough to have made sure he was in the caravan himself. But somehow he wasn't. So they rush back to Jerusalem to look for him. And it took another three days to find him. And when they did, he sassed them, right there in front of everyone gathered in the temple. This child! Good Lord.

It's surprising to me, really, that there isn't more out there in popular culture about this 4-5 day period in Jesus' life. Sure, he was in the temple, engaging in theological discourse with the scholars there, which wouldn't necessarily make for a riveting movie. But what else happened? What did he eat? Did he sleep there overnight, or did someone take him in? Were Simeon and Anna still around? She would have been 96 by then, and Simeon made it sound like he was planning to shuffle off the mortal coil after seeing Jesus as a baby, so probably not. If not them, who else was there to look out for him? Did he just decide, in his twelve-year-old spiritual wisdom, to fast for a while? That seems just as unlikely. Was he having an adventure the whole time, or were there moments when he got scared that he'd done a pretty dumb thing? These would all be interesting questions to explore in a book or a movie. But there's no way to get around the fact that what he did was deeply inconsiderate to his parents.

The writer of Luke seems aware of this, embarrassed even, as he assures us that afterward, Jesus went home to Nazareth with Mary & Joseph and "was obedient to them." Because, you know, the rebellious things that twelve-year-olds do tend to just go away as kids enter their teen years. Of course he never caused any trouble again. So there's a perspective in parenting for you: you may think your kid is a pain, but at least they're not a tween with the confidence and intelligence of the God of the Universe. To say that parenting Jesus was a challenge is probably an understatement. I'm just surprised this is the only story we have about it.

On the other hand, it could be that Mary & Joseph aren't the only ones who deserve our sympathy in this situation. We've established that sneaking off to stay behind in Jerusalem was a pretty drastic step for twelve-year-old Jesus to take. What sorts of internal struggles must have led up to such a choice? How acutely aware must he have been that he wasn't getting what he needed in his home life to have decided to leave it behind like this? It was obviously a risk, but something big must have compelled him to take it, even with an awareness of how it would hurt his parents.

There are plenty of children around us whose immediate families couldn't give them what they needed to become who God has called them to be. Some of you are in the room right now. At some level, for many people, being faithful to who God created them to be, demands that they leave home behind and seek nurture from other sources. For most people, it doesn't happen at age twelve, but it can easily start that early. In most, if not all, of these situations, there is some degree of tension and hurt when the parents feel rejected and abandoned, whether they feel they did their best or not. It takes a highly mature person to be nothing but happy for your child when they find what they need by leaving behind what you have to offer and seeking something different. But there are people who accomplish that. There are even parents who determine that they need to learn and grow so that they can become more able to be parents to their children, who are expressing needs they barely understand.

But far more often, what happens is what we see played out in this story today: people learn to parent themselves, identifying their needs and figuring out how to get them met. For anyone who's ever had to be the parent they always needed but never had, this story offers succor and hope. Despite all that stuff about "honoring your father and mother" that angry parents may have thrown at you, there is also biblical precedent for taking matters into your hands and finding the nurture you need elsewhere. It doesn't pretend that it's a process that will eliminate tension and hurt feelings. But it does offer a perspective that respects that we are often more than the sum of our family origin. It makes clear that it is not Mary & Joseph's fault that they couldn't provide what Jesus needed in that moment. But it also gives him permission to seek out the spiritual nourishment he wasn't getting at home.

The passage we read from Colossians speaks to us of compassion and kindness, gratitude and peace. If only all parents and children could embody all these traits all the time! But we don't, do we? Either as parents or as children. And so we end up having to try again, in other directions. We end up trying to parent ourselves, offering the compassion and patience we never received to our own inner child; forgiving ourselves and our parents for what we couldn't give. We end up parenting each other – whether the children in our midst who don't quite fit into their own families, or friends our own age or older – extending kindness rather than judgment, welcoming peace instead of bitter assumptions or long-held grudges. We walk each other through the long, winding road of complex family relations, helping one

another balance the love that we feel for family members with recognition of the harm they may have done to us or how the ways in which they taught us to live don't lead to thriving in our particular situation.

As we move toward the end of the holiday season, these long-standing family tensions may be close to the surface for some. Expectations that you've worked hard to find release from may have weighed heavier over the past few weeks.

Disappointments that haunt you may have re-appeared in the shadows of the long nights. Reminders may have arisen of the struggles you've had to love people whose desires for you limited you to a box you didn't fit into. But this story is here to set you free. Jesus had to break free of the assumptions of his family, and you have permission to do the same. There will be tension and hurt, but that too, can be navigated with compassion and kindness, and even a little more humility than a twelve-year-old may have been able to muster.

As we enter into a new year, it's a fantastic time to come to terms with the ways we've have to parent ourselves. It's a good time to look around and see where we can help parent others, whether children or fellow adult children, with the compassion and kindness they need. It's a good time to forgive and release our own parents from the obligation to be someone they aren't. It's a good time to find a new perspective on parenting, the way we were parented and the way we can parent ourselves and others. It's a good time to clothe ourselves in love and give thanks, letting the peace of Christ – Emmanuel – rule within our hearts. Hallelujah and Amen!