

Sermon Summary for January 2, 2011

Luke 2:41-52

⁴¹Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. ⁴²And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom. ⁴³And when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it, ⁴⁴but supposing him to be in the group they went a day's journey, but then they began to search for him among their relatives and acquaintances, ⁴⁵and when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, searching for him. ⁴⁶After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸And when his parents saw him, they were astonished. And his mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress." ⁴⁹And he said to them, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" ⁵⁰And they did not understand the saying that he spoke to them. ⁵¹And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart. ⁵²And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.

Good News for Families

How many of you have made New Year's resolutions? Come on, there has to be more than that! OK. I'll let you keep your privacy. This next question is rhetorical. I don't want any hands.

How many of you have broken your resolutions already?

Can you guess the most popular New Year's resolutions? You probably can. 1. Exercise more. 2. Lose weight. 3. Quit smoking.

My brother is an expert at excuses. When I asked why he didn't exercise he answered: "If God had wanted us to touch our toes, He would have put them further up on our bodies." I said, "Why don't you try running in place?" He answered, "In place of what?" When I asked him when he would quit smoking, he answered, "It's easy to quit smoking! I've done it a dozen times already."

Then there's losing weight. Did you know that Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig, and Nutri-System have their biggest membership increases in January? I guess it's because of those New Year's resolutions. Well, I want to tell you something. My Weight Watchers coach told us never to make New Year's resolutions about our weight. Like any addiction, dealing with over-eating has to be accomplished one day at a time. (Goals are fine, if they're incremental and not overwhelming, by the way.)

Here's a little practical advice. There are three kinds of resolutions you should never make.

1. Resolutions that call for any kind of perfection. That's just wishful thinking.
2. Resolutions that you've made over and over again. This problem indicates that you have to go deeper into your inner life to deal with the issue, not just your surface activities.

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3. Resolutions that involve changing the inside of another person. We can manipulate behavior sometimes, but only God can change a person's heart.

This is especially hard to learn in family life. We are so close to our immediate family that we think we can change them easily. And of course that's not reality. Does it seem to you that family problems are increasing these days? It sure does to me.

When I began the pastoral ministry 38 years ago, there didn't seem to be as many family problems. Of course, maybe people are just more honest today in this Oprah world, but I think there's more to it than that. The sixties tore apart the tradition of life-long sexual faithfulness in marriage that most people believed in (even if they didn't practice it). Along with easy birth control, abortion on demand, growing sexual permissiveness, and an increase in various addictions, there was an assault on the very meaning of marriage. Instead of an institution dedicated to community, responsibility, and stable child-raising, marriage became an instrument of self-fulfillment. In fact, self-fulfillment became the official purpose of life! When our founders spoke of "the pursuit of happiness," they had an 18th century meaning in mind, in which "happiness" was correlated with goodness or virtue. Today "happiness" only means having pleasurable sensations and experiences.

This new definition of happiness has wreaked havoc on our notions of commitment, promise-keeping, and moral duty. This deterioration in ethics has contributed mightily to the breakdown of marriage and family life today. The wreckage of broken marriages has produced children with an extraordinary amount of pain in their lives. This in turn has been passed on to their own children. And so we live among the ruins of so many families and lives.

And that brings us to our text. Jesus was part of a family here on earth. Of course family life was different in many ways back then. When first century Jews said "family" they didn't mean our nuclear family of father, mother, and 2.1 children; they meant the whole clan, from grandparents down through cousins many times removed. So, when a family went to Jerusalem for a big religious festival, it was like a caravan. There would have been many adults, many animals, and plenty of children.

In that situation it wasn't surprising that Mary and Joseph at first did not miss young Jesus. He had probably walked to Jerusalem in the company of his young cousins, and they expected Him to be with the same group on the return trip. The scene which transpired when they missed him and came hurrying back to the city to search for him sounds like a conversation between modern parents and teenagers. "Where were you? Why didn't you tell us where you were going? Do know how worried we were?"

But Jesus' answer was different. It was respectful, but it made it clear that Jesus had His own agenda in life. I don't know if His phrase "my Father's house" hurt Joseph or not. He knew Who Jesus' real Father was. But it certainly demonstrated that Jesus had His own agenda in life.

And that's true of our own teenagers. Their agenda is to become independent adults. Their parents' agenda is to nurture and protect them so this can happen without pitfalls. Misunderstanding each other leads to a conflict between these two agendas. And simple misunderstanding is so often complicated by sin. Teenagers sin by being rebellious and

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disrespectful. And parents sin by being tyrannical and over-controlling. Two agendas that are supposed to fit together like meshing gears are too often way out of synch.

Now I want to make three points.

First, Jesus was a good kid. I mean, what more can we say? He was the Son of God. He was no juvenile delinquent!

Second, even good kids can cause their parents pain. Sam Levinson put it this way: "Childhood is a time of rapid changes. Between the ages of 12 and 17 a parent can age 30 years." Parents are sinners, and parenting is never perfect. And teenagers are sinners, and growing up is never without its thrills and spills (many mercifully unknown to the parents!). In the words of Robert Orben: "Sound travels slowly; sometimes the things you say to your teenagers don't reach them till they're in their 40's."

Third, there is good news for families in the Gospel. This point has two sub-points.

A. Because God forgives us, we can forgive one another. Parents can't raise children without the need for forgiveness on both sides. None of us gets it exactly right. But in the cross of Christ we can forgive one another our sins and shortcomings. In the case of very serious problems like abuse, reconciliation may not be possible, but the freedom of forgiveness is always available in Christ.

B. Our human families are not eternal. Not all family stories have a happy ending. You know that. But earthly families are temporary arrangements. (If you doubt this, see Matthew 22:23-29.) There's only one family that will last for all eternity, and that's what Hal Lindsey calls "God's Forever Family." Our real Father is our Heavenly Father. Our real siblings are our brothers and sisters in Christ. Our real Spouse is Jesus.

We will bear the scars of family sins until we die. Although there is substantial healing available through the Holy Spirit (praise God!), some hurts are too deep to go away completely in this life. But a day is coming, dear ones, when those scars will disappear, when those tears will be washed away. That's why Jesus came, that's why He lived a perfect life (even as a teenager!) for us, so that we could receive His righteousness to cover our failings, His mercy to heal our wounds, and His family to be ours forever.

If you grew up in a happy family, what we used to call a "normal" family, give thanks to God. You have been spared much suffering in this life. But if you carry around the hurts and regrets of a tragic family life, do not despair. You have God's overwhelming love and forgiveness in Christ. He will give you strength to walk on with His peace and His comfort, until one day He welcomes you home forever.