

The Secret to Parenting
Scripture Lesson: Luke 2:41-52

Two days after we gather in the glow of candlelight to sing about a silent night, we wake up to a lectionary lesson about a missing adolescent. You can almost here Mary saying to Joseph, “Seems like only yesterday that we held him in our arms in Bethlehem, ...and now we can’t find him!” Time flies when you are raising a child. It doesn’t take long to go from the thrill of a newborn child to the task of parenting.

Before we go filing a report against Joseph and Mary with Social Services for neglect of a child, let’s look at the situation with first century eyes.

Back then, people didn’t fly down superhighways with the videos playing in the back seat so their children would never have a reason to look out the window. They didn’t check the GPS to see for how far it was to the hotel where they had make a reservation from an iPhone.

Back then, people walked or road animals, and they traveled in large groups of friends. Travel was a journey that became a social occasion, with camping on the roadside the common practice. Adults talked along the way, while their children played and ran and traveled together. Adolescents back then probably preferred friend company to parental proximity. Some things never change.

I imagine there was some nostalgic talk about the old days when Father Abraham and the clan wandered and camped like nomads. Someone might have said something about needing that pillar of fire at night so they could see to put up the tents. It was evening when families re-grouped, and it is then that Mary and Joseph missed Jesus. They went looking, all the way back to Jerusalem. After three days of “great anxiety” - a nice translator’s phrase for frantic searching and some panic - they find him “sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.”

I’ve never lost a child for three days, but I can remember a brief time when our daughter was of sight in a big crowd. I can words in Joseph’s mouth: “Thank God we found you. Do you realize you have scared us to death?” “Well, ..no.” Mary jumps in, “We’ve searched high and low for you. Where have you been?” “Right here. We came to be at the temple, didn’t we? Why didn’t you look for me here first?”

Jesus’ curiosity with the teachers is the more interesting lesson than our supposition of neglect and parent failing. It is the reason that Mary treasured all these things in her heart. Think how we have this story. She is the one who had to tell it in those gatherings of the early Christians in informal worship. “I remember the time...,” and they listened for the lessons.

There are some lessons here - about Jesus, and about parenting. What can we learn in this one episode we have from Jesus’ growing up years?

The first one is pretty obvious, but it is one we tend to forget. We read this story thinking that it proves that Jesus was God, divine, had all the answers, could teach all the teachers. But Luke puts the story in here to show how he grew up human, with human parents who taught him how to walk and talk, with parents who knew he had great gifts and they had special responsibilities. Jesus did *not* have a human body and a divine mind! He had to learn about God from somewhere, and he learned about God from Mary and Joseph.

Jesus grew up, learned things. Jesus was “fully human.” He learned about God where children always learn about God. In synagogue - for us, in church. Or more accurately, in his home. Joseph and Mary did a great job of educating Jesus in the faith! He took to it, and when they made the annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem, it was for a kind of trip for “Confirmation” of his weekly experience of scripture knowledge and faith formation. Jesus was precocious, but more accurately, Jesus was following the example of his father and mother.

Even today, “practicing Jews” integrate home life and synagogue life for learning and worship much better than we Christians and especially mainline protestants do. We Presbyterians really separate the two. Religious talk, religious ritual at home is pretty much limited to saying grace at table, if we do that. We take children to church for instruction and worship; teaching children the faith is the Christian Education committee’s job.

These are relatively recent developments in the church. We sit in a historic building - well, the sanctuary part of it. If we wanted to be truly historic, we would need to tear down all the Sunday School and Fellowship space, and the nursery. For fellowship, they had “dinner on the grounds” from time to time. “Sunday School” is a late 19th century development, that really did not take hold until mid-20th century. Before then, children learned to read the Bible, because their parents opened the Bible at home.

The church has become the place where our children learn about God, instead of the home. Lots of resources and skill and expertise has really helped us shape the faith formation of children, and parents can really trust what their children are learning in church. Nurturing children has been a Presbyterian priority, and our denomination has been a model for others in Christian education of children and youth.

It has worked! I’ve been leading confirmation classes on and off for about 20 years, and I can tell you that by 13 or 14 years old, it is amazing how much young people know about God and the faith - if they are just here every week for Sunday School and sit in church and come to Vacation Bible School and come to youth group. If church is an integrated part of their weekly life, they “get it.”

They even sometimes ask the questions that make us adults grow in the faith. Bright young people want to know why we still cling to ideas of creation that are pre-scientific? They ask questions about God and other religions that test our assumptions and authority - and sometimes scare us because we have stopped asking questions.

But there are also some really tragic revelations that have come out of the way that we have done spiritual formation with children since the 50's. Some of the ways we have been educating our children and youth have actually worked against us.

The first mistake is that worship is not a substitute for teaching and learning, and vice-versa. Children need their protein and their vegetables. They need worship and learning for a balanced spiritual diet. Limiting them to church and excusing them for "extended session" is asking them to live on a snack.

The second revelation is that occasional coming to church is not much different than not coming at all. The increasing "competition" of other activities and "enrichments" for children's learning and experience has caused many of us to put religious instruction into the same classification of enrichment. Spiritual education is like math. It is not incidental; it is essential. If faith formation is only happening at church, and church becomes occasional, then faith becomes incidental. When church is occasional in home patterns, growing up means moving from an occasional "do I have to" to a "I can't make them go."

Since people assume that teaching the faith is the the church's job, we leaders in the church have taken a lot of heat for this decline of children and youth in church. Yes, I think we pastors and youth leaders could do better. But I don't think the problem is at church.

I always remember a coffee conversation after church one day with some parents who complained that they just could not get their eight year old up early enough to get her to Sunday School. About that time, she came running up. So I just asked her, "Sarah, do you like Sunday School?" "Oh yes, Mr. Bill is my friend. (Mr. Bill was 75 years old and sat on the floor with them.) And he sends me cards in the mail when I miss." So, I asked her parents, "So, who's having trouble getting up on Sunday?"

We have done studies about a related, persistent problem in Presbyterian life for the last four decades: why young people quit coming to Sunday School as soon as they make confirmation vows to become active members. The overwhelming answer is clear: after confirmation, they become "adult members" - and adults don't have to go to Sunday School. Their parents don't go to Sunday School.

Now before some of us start singing the "what's wrong with parents these days" chorus, I want to point out the real point of these studies. It was not about parents at all. It was about adults. We teach children and young people the faith, and we tell them they need to come to church, and we tell them that they need to read the Bible, and we tell them to be kind to others and help the poor, and we tell them that they ought to follow Jesus example.

And too often we are saying, "Do as I say, not as I do." Our children will always wind up doing as we do, more than as we say.

Jesus was fully human. He "increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor." He was surrounded by people who did what they said, and lived what they learned - whose faith life was obvious in their home life and work life and play life.

There is a crisis developing in church life in America. It is not a crisis about worship style, although we use worship wars to keep from talking about real issues we face in the church. It is not a crisis of culture competition, though we are not good in church about talking honestly with people about learning to say yes-and-no to culture choices. It is not a crisis of financial insufficiency in church, though the increasing costs of modern church in insurance and building and compensation and whatever cannot be met with the steady decline in levels of contribution.

What is the crisis? The crisis is the dramatic absence of people under 35 years old who are *not* in any church or in any faith. Students have quit church before they go to college, and they do not start back when they find a career in a community. New young parents are not coming back to church when they have babies. Increasingly, Presbyterian babies are baptized by grandparents, because the parents don't have a church or an interest in church. And when research has looked for the reasons they are not in church, two not-surprising answers come back.

First for those who have come and tried church, but left: they leave because they do not have a voice with the older generation who vetoes their ideas. The way "we always do it" always trumps the way they suggest. Always being "open to new ideas" does not mean much if no new idea ever becomes a new reality. The seven last words of the church are said everywhere: "We've never done it that way before." They will become the nine last words: "We stayed the same until we closed the door."

Second for those who may or may not have grown up in church but never tried: they never come, because they do not see that church people live any differently from non-church people. Their business practices look no different than non-church goers, their use of power and influence in the community can be positive or ruthless. Their leisure activities or casual conversations can give little indication of their Christian identity. They can be civic minded, or serve on boards, or be decent people, and you never know they go to church. Good or bad, there are lots of people who never go to church. Good or bad, the same types seem to be in church. Church does not make a difference. So, for them church is a waste of time.

I am realistic enough that I don't think we can start all over again. But if the way we are doing it is not serving the future generations, we need to admit that we will run out of generations. And if we change some things now, it will only help us tomorrow. The changes need to be more about what each of us does than what "the church does" - which usually means someone else can change.

I'm not changing some things. I promise you that I am going to overdose on football between now and the 4th of January. And after that I am going to turn to the really great sport, and see my share of it all the way through March madness. I doubt I will be the only one here to do that.

But maybe we should all think about ways we Christians could use some of our time differently, and set some priorities to show our priority. Let's make some vows to Christ for the new year that are more serious than resolutions we don't take seriously.

...that we will make worship a priority in our week, and it will guide our decisions through the week.

...that we will put children front and center in our congregation's life, and build a church for their future.

...that we will encourage all our parents, and make the needs and ideas they have for church life more important in our programming.

...that we will make our own continuing education in the faith a regular exercise in an adult Sunday School class or a mid-week study or regular reading or daily devotions.

...that we will put faith into practice in living and service where people can see that we live differently because we go to church, and we will tell people that we serve because we are Christians.

...that we will be conscious that we should stop doing things that would cause people under 35 to think we are like everyone else, and we will look for opportunities to show our faith whenever we can.

The secret to Joseph and Mary's parenting was that they lived what they were teaching to their children, and their children saw the application as well as the instruction. We Presbyterians make vows whenever a child is baptized to be parents to them, to live the faith before them, to teach the faith to them, to make them a part of the family of God in the worship and work of the congregation. The greater vow we need to remember is that we should always live - in our life at the church and our lives in the home and our lives in the world - by what we are saying and the standards we are telling them.

Jesus never said, "Do as I say, not as I do." He said, "Do what I do. Say what I say. Just follow me."