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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Luke 1:39-55
Jesus Declares His Path

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁴⁸And when they 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 looking for you anxiously.” ⁴⁹And he said to them, “How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:48-49, RSV)

Happy Christmas, everyone! It was just two days ago that we celebrated the birth of Jesus in the stable in Bethlehem. Now, in this morning’s Bible story, we leap ahead to Jesus as a twelve-year-old boy. It is our first chance to hear Him speak. He says something quite remarkable, I believe.

Before getting to that, I would like to return to a point I made last Sunday about Mary the Mother of Our Lord. I said then that Mary had good reason to commend her Son to us because she had seen with her own eyes the purity, self-discipline, and dedication of her Child to the will of the God of Israel and so to the welfare of humanity.

I noted that for Mary and Joseph, as for many mothers and fathers, they suffered along the way of raising this little One entrusted to them. Today’s story of twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple gives an illustration of this. You can detect something of this suffering in Mary’s question to her Son:

⁴⁸And when they 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 looking for you *anxiously*.” (Luke 2:48, RSV)

That last word there, “anxiously,” has pathos in it. The underlying Greek word, *odunao*, appears later in Luke’s Gospel to describe the anguish of the condemned one in the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man¹:

¹ A nice point made by Peter W. Marty in *The Lectionary Commentary: The Third Readings* (William B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2001), page 306.

²³and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes, and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus in his bosom. ²⁴And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy upon me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in *anguish* in this flame.' ²⁵But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in *anguish*.' (Luke 16:23-25, RSV)

If I were to say to you mothers and fathers, "It is not always easy to raise your children. It is not always a bed of roses," one or two of you might sigh and whisper an "Amen" to that. So it was with Mary and Joseph. They love their Son, he is a good Son, a deep joy to them, but he is missing. Yes, and he has been missing for three days. They are anxious, fearful, beset by regrets, tormented with imaginations of harm to their Child.

I sympathize with these parents. And yet the whole incident does point to a wondrous human reality, which is that our children, God bless them strong! are ultimately mysterious to us. They are their own free spirits, their own children of God. They have their own path to find, their own path to walk. And for all we know, they might be more spiritual than we are.

That is a wholesome thought to ponder. Might not our children be more spiritual than us? Might not their path of Christian discipleship be different from our own? Might not it be good for us to give them some more spiritual room, to not discourage them in their prayers or their holy longing?

For us Lutherans, we have a famous example close at hand. I mean young Martin Luther in relation to his father, Hans. Being a Dad, I naturally sympathize with Hans. Hans knew that he and his wife, Margarethe, had a brilliant child on their hands. Hans formulated the ambition that young Martin would grow up to be an attorney -- the first of the Luthers to enter the professional class. I imagine that it would have been useful to Hans, who was part owner of a coal mine, to have an attorney for a son.

So, they sacrificed, I bet, and sent Martin to college. Martin became the first of the Luthers to have a college education. Then to law school, where Luther continued to demonstrate his brilliance, being a top law student.

But, then, the rest is history. After his first year in law school, on his way home, he got caught in a severe thunderstorm in a meadow along the way. Lightning struck near him. He cried out, "Save me, St. Anne. I'll become a monk." She saved him and he became a monk, to the great frustration of his father.

This was hard to explain, even to Luther himself. He knew that the Fourth Commandments required him to honor his father and mother, while here he was in clear disobedience to his father. The best sense I can make of it is that he had to make it clear that the First Commandment comes before the Fourth Commandment, and that his highest loyalty had to be not to his earthly father but to his heavenly Father.

So, it is in this morning's Gospel story: twelve-year-old Jesus makes it clear that though he loves and honors his parents, his first and greatest loyalty is to his heavenly Father.

"Yes, Preacher," you might say, "but what if I know that this *particular* path is not the right one for my child? Hans could not swear that becoming a monk was wrong, but I am quite certain that the path of life my child is presently walking is wrong for him, for her. What should I do?"

This is a hard question and a very important question. In a way, it is a chief Christian adventure for many parents. It is a question that invites prayer and increased devotion to Christ in our own lives, that we might serve our young ones in His name.

I believe that St. Paul gives us some good guidelines to our task. His advice seems important to him, because he repeats it twice, once in his epistle to the Colossians and once in his epistle to the Ephesians (Eph 6:1-4). Here is the version from Colossians:

²⁰Children, obey your parents in all things: for this is well pleasing unto the Lord.

²¹Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged. (Col 3:20-21, KJV)

It is a double exhortation. The first part is addressed to the children, the second part to the parents. The exhortation to the parents asks us to practice a kind of gentleness. It does not ask us to give up in trying to lead our children, but it does ask us to avoid wrath, lest we "discourage" our children.

If we knew the heart of our sister and brother parents out there, some of them might be able to give us the good testimony that things turned out well for them in the end through this policy. In fact, some of them could be glad to report that their children turned out better than they themselves.

I have known some children like that -- children who did not have much of a foundation in faith from their parents and yet, through God's grace, have grown up to be strong Christians. Maybe mother and father will follow them someday. In spiritual matters too, sometimes the child is teacher to the parent.

And for those of us who have had parents of strong faith, let us say a prayer of thanks for them from time to time. They might not have left us wealth, but they left us a good name and a good inheritance anyway.

So, that is Mary and Joseph in this story about Jesus in the Temple. They have been left in painful anxiety by the path that Jesus is setting out upon.

And what now of Jesus himself? He sounds nonchalant in the story, as if it should have been as plain as the nose of his parents' faces that he must be in his Father's house. But there is no necessity to think that this departure from his parents was easy for young

Jesus. In fact, given the whole sweep of the story of Jesus, it is likely that this was a hard step for the lad.

We know that Jesus was fully human, same as you and me. He was tempted in every manner such as we are. This is explicitly stated in the *Letter to the Hebrews*:

For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been *tempted as we are*, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4:15, RSV)

But even if it were not spelled out, we find enough in the story of Jesus to recognize a kindred spirit. We know from the desert temptations that he was tempted by food, power, and glory. And we know from his agony of spirit in the Garden of Gethsemane that Jesus was frightened by death and would gladly have avoided it if only it were his Father's will.

But that is the thing: It was *not* his Father's will that Jesus avoid suffering. And the striking thing about today's Gospel story is that it shows the first picture of Jesus submitting to the will of his heavenly Father. Why, this is the first time we hear Jesus speak in this story. Before this, he was just a Babe in Bethlehem, then a child exile in Egypt, and then a boy in his father's carpentry shop in Nazareth. We have not heard him speak, but now we do:

⁴⁹And he said to them, "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:49, RSV)

Again, let us not assume that this was easy for him. It meant that Jesus was setting out on a path somewhat different from that of his parents, and that, in turn, meant that, like some young bird, he was stepping out of the nest. He was leaving the quiet, private world of home and family, and with firm determination stepping into the public world of the Temple and the scholars.

Chief of all, he was leaving the safety of home and starting down a path that would eventually lead him to Calvary. His principle was firmly in place:

Did you not know that I *must* be in my Father's house? (Luke 2:50, RSV)

Let me end the same way our Bible story ends, with the point that dedication to the will of his heavenly Father did not make Jesus a bad Son to Joseph and Mary. The text is careful to say that having established his ultimate loyalty, Jesus then returned to the safety and love of his family:

⁵¹And he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them; and his mother kept all these things in her heart. ⁵²And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man. (Luke 2:51-52, RSV)

So, it will always be. Whole-hearted love of God will always incline us back toward our families, for this God we love likewise loves our families and would have us grow in favor with them. Indeed, whole-hearted love of God will always incline us toward love for this whole world, for it was for everybody that Jesus dedicated his life, all the way to his body and blood.

To him be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.