

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

Tension in the Temple **The Second Sunday After Christmas Day** **January 3, 2010**

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Luke 2:41-52 (NIV)

Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. ⁴² When he was twelve years old, they went up to the Feast, according to the custom. ⁴³ After the Feast was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. ⁴⁴ Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵ When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. ⁴⁶ After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷ Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸ When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." ⁴⁹ "Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" ⁵⁰ But they did not understand what he was saying to them. ⁵¹ Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. ⁵² And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.

This morning's gospel reading gives us the only glimpse we have of Jesus' boyhood. It seems very true to our experience. A twelve-year-old boy full of life and confidence takes it upon himself to go off on his own for three days, making his parents frantic with worry and anxiety. What parent hasn't had

anxious moments? What twelve-year-old hasn't risked upsetting his or her parents? When his frazzled parents finally find him after three days, you can almost hear the plea in Mary's voice: **"Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you."** Clearly she's upset. Her eldest son has never given them a moment's trouble before. Many parents have had a child who waited until they were an adolescent to test the boundaries. It's shocking when it happens, but it does happen.

But what's remarkable about Luke's report is that the boy who has his parents climbing the walls is, after all, Jesus Christ. This is not the story of an ordinary middle school student getting swept up in the excitement of a holiday with family and friends and losing track of time. No middle-school student ever gave his parents Jesus' reason for driving them crazy: **"Why were you searching for me?" he asked. 'Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?'"** How soon we forget. This is Jesus, "whom shepherds watch and angels sing". How soon Mary has forgotten that that she first learned she was going to have this child because an angel told her. She has forgotten what the shepherds who visited soon after his birth had said about the whole creation dancing to the songs the angels sang to announce his birth. "Of course," she must have thought. "Of course." This worry, this anxiety, must be just the point, the beginning of the entry of the sword the angel announced would pierce her heart. (Luke 2:35)

There is tension here in the temple between Mary and Joseph and Jesus. Mary's pleading tone may reflect her feeling less than loved by her son. At the very least he seems to have been inconsiderate of her and Joseph. But what may seem lack of consideration is really Jesus himself living out one of the conditions he sets for his disciples: **"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters--yes, even his own life--he cannot be my disciple."** (Luke 14:26) This is one of Jesus' "hard sayings". There is no way to soften or minimize this—the word is "hate" or "have contempt for". But what does Jesus mean?

There are two things he *doesn't* mean. First, he doesn't mean that we are to have feelings of animosity or contempt for our families. We think of "hate" is an emotion. It has to do with an inner attitude and emotional response to someone or something. But in biblical terms, "hate" has more to do with behavior: how we treat someone or something. Jesus' treatment of his parents in our gospel reading is a perfect example. What he's done feels unloving and inconsiderate. Yet what he says doesn't in any way seem hateful or angry or contemptuous towards Mary and Joseph. He's respectful, but he's also very clear about who he is and what he came to do. What he has done is to focus on God, his heavenly Father. Mary and Joseph come second, and it makes them feel hurt. So when

Jesus says we must hate our family in order to be his disciples, he doesn't mean we're to feel or express animosity towards them. Rather, we're to put God first in what we do. This may upset our families at times. It certainly upset Mary and Joseph. More about that later.

The second thing it doesn't mean is that we should use putting God first as an excuse to ignore or neglect our families. I've known people who've lived like this. They're so caught up in their personal spiritual life that they pay no attention to their families. Jesus doesn't do this either. To the contrary, because he was God's Son, Jesus was completely dedicated to God's will. God's will means fulfilling every God-given human responsibility. Every child's responsibility is to obey his parents. Luke tells us, "**he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them.**" When we reach adulthood, our responsibility is to honor them. At the end of his life, dying on the cross, he took care of his mother by giving her into the care of his disciple John.

I've suggested what Jesus doesn't mean by hating your family and loving God. What does he mean in a positive sense? He means that we must put God first, ahead of every other relationship. But when we do that, we have to allow God to adjust the way we behave in those relationships. We start to love our families the way God loves them. We all know the two great commandments: love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. Our closest neighbors are usually our family members. Every one of us is called to love our neighbor. No one can say, "I'm not called to do that."

When Jesus says we are to "hate" our families, he means that like Mary and Joseph, our families may feel as though loving them God's way is not loving at all. They may resent it or become upset when we obey God by loving them God's way. Loving our families God's way sometimes rubs in exactly the opposite direction from the way families like to do things.

For example, take the family where one person works hard helping everyone else. He or she does everything: the laundry, the bills, plans for family vacations, acting as consultant for relationships, passing messages among family members and friends, picking out peoples' wardrobes, making doctor's appointments, and so on.

From the helpful person's point of view, he or she is loving their family by serving them. But from God's point of view, the family member who thinks they're being helpful isn't. By taking on so much responsibility, he or she is simply training everyone else to be irresponsible. Part of loving our families God's way is allowing individuals to take their God-given responsibility for themselves. This is a crucial part of parenting, but it's also true of relationships between adults.

How does a person who's been "unhelpfully helping" the other members of their family start loving them God's way? By not helping them do things they are perfectly able to do for themselves. But when they stop helping unhelpfully, how do you suppose the other family members respond? They may very likely get upset. One family member has always relied on the unhelpful helper to keep track of things. "Where'd you put my yellow sweater?," they ask. Loving God's way, the response comes, "I didn't put it anywhere. It's your sweater." Another family member has always relied on that person to take care of the details of their life. They ask, "How come you didn't make an appointment for an oil change for my car?" The response from God's love is, "Gee, it's your car. I thought you'd want to take care of it." Another family member has always relied on this person as a go-between in social relationships. They say, "Hey, I thought you were going to invite Janie to my party." The person loving their family God's way now responds, "Well it's not my party, it's yours. Why don't you invite her?"

If you're a person who's used to "unhelpfully helping", it's a huge effort not to. It's just so much easier to find the sweater, to make the appointment, to invite the friend, than to deal with what happens when you don't. But is that really loving your family? Isn't it better to allow them the God-given dignity of taking responsibility for themselves?

Our real motive in being "unhelpfully helpful" is to make ourselves feel better. We're really serving ourselves, not our family. We're not really doing what's in the best interests of others. We feel better knowing that they'll leave the house nicely dressed, or that their car will have had the proper maintenance, or that their party will be a success. But those things are the responsibility of other people, aren't they?

Those of us who are "unhelpful helpers" need to take up our cross and follow Jesus by loving our families God's way. That means nailing our need to take responsibility for others to the cross. It means resisting the pressure our family may put on us to continue "unhelpfully helping".

Or how about the family member who isn't a believer and won't come to church or listen to us when we talk about Jesus? How can we influence them to accept the gospel and come to faith? Again, we can look to Jesus' boyhood interaction with his parents for guidance. At first glance, his response to their anguish seems like backtalk: "**why were you searching for me?**" But think about it. It's not unreasonable to wonder why Mary and Joseph didn't expect something unusual from Jesus, given the amazing supernatural events at his birth. But Jesus doesn't reprimand them. He doesn't call them hopeless heathen unbelievers. He doesn't complain that they just don't "get it", as though there's

something wrong with them that needs to be fixed. He simply focuses on what he needs to do: **“Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?”**

In the same way, as believers, we need to clearly state our priorities and our commitments to Christ and his church to members of our family who don't believe. And that's all. No arguing or cajoling, or trying to manipulate them towards relationships with Christian friends, or emailing them Christian reading material. We want them to believe, for our own reasons, but the truth is that God wants it more.

Just state your commitment and pray for them. Their salvation is God's responsibility: not yours, not mine. And God will respond. It's quite remarkable the numbers older people I've seen come to Christ after one or another family member has quietly witnessed to them for years, or even decades.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, became a human being, a member of a family. Like every family, they had different ideas about how things ought to be done, including serving God. When he grew to be a man, he told people who wanted to follow him that they would have to hate the members of their own families. But what he meant was that sometimes what we think of as love in our relationships can be self-serving. Like Jesus, our first priority must be to do the will of God. That will includes loving our family God's way. It means praying for them and relating to them in ways that put God's will for them before our desires and expectations for them.

Let us pray.

Father, you establish and define family for us. Help us, we pray, to love you with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and love our neighbors, especially our families, with your love. Give us grace to focus on your will for each person, not our own. Send your Spirit through your word to speak to us your will for each member of our family, and help us to be instruments of your will for them, for your glory and their good. Amen.