December 30th – 10:30am

Springfield Presbyterian Church

A Headache for the Parents

I. The Passover Party

This passage from Luke is absolutely one of my favourite Scripture lessons in the Bible, and perhaps you wonder – why? It has a comedy to it, a humour, and most of all, a humanity that resonates with me. Even the most Holy Family can have its dysfunction and issues. That’s good news for any of us, in any human family, to recognize. This whole being human and in relationship thing is a bit harder than advertised on TV, and it’s evident right in the Scriptures.

For fun, let’s take this story and place it in a normal family within the historical context. Your fictional family is Larry and Ruth, lovely folks, devoted Jews, who bring their son, Jay, every year to the big Passover party in Jerusalem. It’s a wonderful celebration. There’s singing, dancing, eating, reading the Scriptures, and thoughtfully remembering covenant of God coming through in the release of captives from Israel. Sure, Larry and Ruth go for themselves to praise God, but they want to raise their first born child in the faith.

The party wraps up, another year in the book, and Larry and Ruth need to get back to business in Nazareth. And Jay’s a good kid, and surrounded by family and friends, so there’s no reason to think he’s wondered off. Larry and Ruth go a day’s journey and the next day they look at one another and ask, “Have you seen Jay recently?” They ask family and friends, and no one’s seen him. And now, Ruth is in PANIC mode. Where’s Jay? So Ruth and Larry rush back to Jerusalem and search for Jay, but they can’t find him. They go three days, barely sleeping a wink, and if they could have called a police search party, I’m pretty sure they would have.

Then mom and dad step into the temple, and see Jay just sitting there, cool as a cucumber, asking questions of the teachers and the teachers are impressed by this teen’s questions. Ruth goes right up to Jay and says, “Do you *know* how worried sick we were? Dad and I couldn’t sleep. What if something happened to you? You should have told us you were here? Ah, Jay, you’re gonna kill your mom doing these things! Young man, what were you thinking?!” And you can imagine Larry, dutifully standing behind Ruth, arms crossed, giving that look that no teenager wants to see.

And Jay, he looks up to his parents, still angelic, and gives this strange answer. Instead of a “I’m so sorry, I messed up, it’ll never happen again mom, I promise.” Jay says, “Why were you looking for me? I’m in my dad’s house.” Ruth and Larry look puzzled, shake their heads, and say, “Come on Jay, we’re going home.”

And from then on, Jay was obedient and thoughtful of his mother and father, but Ruth knew that something was special about this moment that she couldn’t quite figure out.

II. Setting up the Actual Scene

Again, this is a regular family in a regular dysfunctional scene. Now, apply that to Mary and Joseph and their young teenager Jesus and it adds a whole new layer of complexities. Mary is there with Joseph and their son has gone missing, but here’s the thing, unlike Jay, they’ve actually lost the very Son of God. Can you imagine how much pressure that must have felt like? Not only do they love their child, but this is the divine being that’s come to earth. The stress levels increase.

And I kind of feel bad for Mary and Joseph when they find Jesus, because you can’t really reprimand the Son of God. And you especially can’t do that when he’s actually doing, in the right circumstances, something wonderful. How can you tell him off for asking religious questions of teachers and learning and digging deeper in his faith and the knowledge of the Scriptures. But still, still, he increased his parents anxiety.

III. Coming of Age

When Mary and Joseph brought the teen back to Nazareth, she reflected on what happened. She didn’t understand, though she knew that the temple was the House of God. And perhaps, like any parent, she was also reflecting on this transformation that was going on within her baby boy. Her baby boy was growing up. No longer was he going to need to be swaddled, or to be sung sweet lullabies before sleeping, or to be carried on his father’s shoulders around the village. Her little boy is growing up, and he is starting to ask questions, and the questions are getting harder to answer, and he’s growing up not only as a human, but as the divine wisdom keeper. Mary is watching her Son grow up, on multiple levels, and I imagine she both grieves that, but rejoices at his growth.

IV. What’s at Stake

Mary may have had a more complicated situation in raising Jesus, but this passage, in some way, is one in which every teenager and every parent can relate. The push and pull of who is in charge is there, and the holding the hand and releasing to freedom are all in the picture. The good news, again, is that, we are not alone and that the Word continues to be relevant for us in 2018. Who, as a teenager, didn’t act a little mischievous, maybe some more than others. Who, as a parent, hasn’t looked at their child with anxiety and frustration and said, “Get back here, *now.*”

The challenge is to accept this as good news and grace – in it’s own way. We all come from families more or less dysfunctional. Even the healthiest of families have their own problems. TV lied to us with the Waltons and Leave it to Beaver – no family is ever that happy all the time. That’s just not real life. That’s just not true. In our more modern TV shows, I appreciate that directors have started to dig deeper into the real realities of the household and the troubles therein.

How many Christmas cards did you receive with a perfect family in a perfect frame, all looking in one direction, smiling joyfully? How many Christmas cards did you receive where one kid is looking this way, the other is looking that way – those are my favourite, because that’s real life. On social media, the perfect couple holds two perfect champagne glasses in their perfect outfits, smiling and posed. Yet, you know that same couple the day before – one had a bad hair day and the other mistakenly wore different shoes to work – but that doesn’t end up on social media, does it? We curate our lives, we play the part, but from the Holy Family to your family and mine, we’ve got our great days and our not so great days, but the Scripture reminds us that we aren’t alone.

And so, accept the grace. Accept the grace that you are not perfect and neither is your family, and actually, look, the Holy Family had its problems too. Every one of us, every family system, has its own growing edges that need to be softened. When you feel guilty, when that crockpot recipe didn’t go right for the family, or the kids are screaming their heads off at one another, or you’ve found yourself in a bitter or sour place with a relative – give yourself some grace. Return to this passage. See that life has some bumps along the way and all will not go smoothly. I’m not saying to totally go wild here, I’m not giving out tickets to use this passage as an excuse not to heal wounds, but I am saying that grace abounds for us human folk trying to live in relationship. It’s hard work.

Go in grace. Go into this New Year with that grace, and may that grace that holds you and abides in you through the Holy Spirit guide you gently into 2019. Amen.