



First Congregational Church (UCC) of Ashfield
429 Main Street – Ashfield MA 01330
Creating Community, Welcoming All

Brief Reflection, Sunday, December 26, 2021: “What Child is This? Whose Child is This?” Bruce Bennett

Before I begin, a disclaimer: Three years ago, December 30, 2018, when the same Bible passage came up, I was the one who happened to be leading worship, and I preached on this same passage. I’m going to repeat a lot of what I said then, mostly because I waited till the last minute to prepare(!), but I’m going to update it a bit, because the world has changed a bit since then.

Let us pray. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Does anybody know a perfect family, where everything runs like a clock and everyone is always calm, cool, and collected? If there were a family that appeared to be perfect, I would worry that they were trying very hard to hide something seriously wrong. Every family has its share of worries and conflicts. It's only human nature.

No family is perfect. Was there ever a family that was perfect? There must have been one perfect family in all of history, at least maybe? The family that Jesus grew up in, right? With Mary and Joseph as parents, and with Jesus as their first child, how could anything go wrong?

Today's scripture bursts that bubble, right? What happens in today's reading? His parents take him to Jerusalem for Passover like they do every year. He is 12 at the time. After the end of Passover [It lasts 8 days!], his parents leave Jerusalem without him! Then they don't even start looking for him for a whole day!

So they look among their friends and neighbors and don't find him. Could he have stayed back in Jerusalem?? Mary and Joseph go back there and look all over.

Before anyone completely freaks out over this, I don't think this was as bad then as it would be nowadays.

It seems like Nazareth, and the “Nazareth-to-Jerusalem-temple-corridor” was one of those kinds of places that come to mind when one hears the saying “takes a village to raise a child.” It seems like it was a place where parents didn't have to feel so hyper-vigilant about the safety of their kids, especially their older kids. People looked out for other people's kids as well as their own.

So, anyway, three days later...three days later...they find Jesus sitting in the temple! What's the reaction of his mom, the one known in song as “Mother Mary, meek and mild”?...

It is definitely not anything like this: “O dearest angel, we are so happy you have found new friends among the Rabbis!” No... not at all like that... Instead, it is like this, and I quote from Luke’s Gospel, line 48b: “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.”

“...Why have you done this to us??? Your father and I [**Your father and I**] have been very worried, and we have been searching for you!”

(Luke might have decided to give us the ‘G’ rated version of what she really said.)

What does 12-year-old Jesus say in reply? Does he say “Oh Mother, I’m soooooo sorry to cause you and Father so much heartache! I should have asked your permission before I left!” No.... he doesn't say that.

Does he get angry and petulant, like some young teens do when they are testing their limits and get caught? Well...not exactly, but some parents might call what he says here “Talking back” or “Mouthing off.”

So what does young Jesus say in reply?

In line 49, he says to them, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”

There is kind of an edge to it, isn't there? But on the other hand, Jesus is not being outright 'flip or sarcastic or disobedient.' He sounds more like he really is surprised that they don't know he is fully capable and in God's Hands. Lines 50-51 say this flat out:

“50 But they did not understand what he said to them. 51 Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them.”

What a remarkable statement! After his big declaration of independence from his parents, Jesus went back to Nazareth with his parents and obeyed them. Even becoming Divine seemed to be a gradual process of learning and growth for Jesus.

Likewise, parenting the son of God was a gradual process of learning and growth for Mary and Joseph. Even the “Holy Family” didn't have to be perfect!

For Jesus, the temple became familiar roots (roots like those of a family) from which he could grow. His family became... “familiar” ... roots from which he could grow too.

The Rev. Dr. Cheryl Lindsay points out in her UCC Sermon Seeds blog for today that this story is told from Mary’s point of view, and that Mary could only tell it from a time later in her life. At the time this event happened, she wouldn’t have been able to see it clearly enough.

I think I see what Rev. Lindsay is driving at. Mary knew from before conception that her son would be Divine, the Son of God. At least she knew that with the depth of understanding that was available to her then, in her teens.

She came to learn soon that she would not only bear the Son of God, but she would come to realize that he would grow to adulthood and suffer crucifixion for the sake of all humanity.

David explained this to us two weeks ago, referring to that dramatic image of the Crucified baby Jesus in the stern and powerful Mary’s womb. A key point he made about that image was that Mary’s blessing included suffering and sacrifice but also it included a power for good, which could arise from loving self-sacrifice.

All these things Mary would come to know about Jesus and her role in his life. But we see here a pivotal point, not only in his life, but in her life too. From what we can glean from the Gospel writers, we don’t hear of the time when Mary sees Jesus show an awareness of his Divinity, of his being not the son of Joseph

but of God, until this very moment. This is the moment when Mary realizes that Jesus knows that he knows.

And, on the “other side of the coin”, so to speak, this is the moment when we hear that young Jesus realizes his parents don’t know that he knows he is Divine.

Aren't these lessons meant for us too? What roots are we providing for our children in our church family, in our church community? How important are they?

When do we stop providing them? Do we take the Bible seriously, not literally?

Our spiritual growth is a lifelong experience of questioning, and it's reassuring to know that even Jesus grew, too. And it's reassuring to know the same about Mary.

By now maybe some of you are thinking that a service the day after Christmas is supposed to be just singing Carols. If so, you're not alone. Here's what Rev. Lindsay has to say about that. I can't improve on it.

“It feels like we just left worship only to have to turn right back around to enter the sacred space, just as Mary and Joseph had to turn around and return to the temple to find Jesus. Sometimes, we don't find Jesus in the big celebrations of the festival. Sometimes, we don't locate Jesus within the companionship of family gatherings. Sometimes, we have to search for an encounter after the big day has ended and we're supposed to return to our routine and normal lives. Sometimes, we don't get it the first time. There's so much we don't understand. And, at the same time, when we reconnect with Jesus, we find that Jesus was right there in the holy space that we carry. And, there's so much to treasure in our hearts.”