

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Christmas

RCL Lectionary, Year C

[Jeremiah 31:7-14](#) / [Psalm 84](#) / [Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a](#) / [Luke 2:41-52](#)

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The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour

Mill Valley, California

Sanctifying Conflict

by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

The holidays are over. Did you all survive? More importantly, did your families and friendships survive? We smile and chuckle a little because we all know the strains the Christmas season brings to just about everyone in our personal lives. We know that the old sore spots in our most cherished relationships emerge this time of year, whether we want them to or not. It's almost a test, isn't it? A test of our patience and wit, of our perseverance and our love.

I just returned from a trip to Southern California with my family, and it would take all morning to unpack the dynamics we wrestled with as a family while simply visiting Camp Snoopy at Knott's Berry Farm. . . We had a good time, for sure, but we encountered the frustrations conflicting agendas and close proximity a long road trip brings to bear – and the simple fatigue that gives rise to my son's teenage exasperation with his parents – even though he's only six – when things don't go the way he planned or expected. In those moments, my wife and I turned to each other with that worried look that wonders what he's going to be like when he truly is a teenager. Some of these episodes will become the stuff of family lore, like the time I wandered off in a shopping mall, leaving my mother frantically searching for me. I imagine many of you have similar memories from your childhood that your parents liked to tell, or ones you remember from your children – those unplanned “gifts” of anxiety your children left you that never quite depart memory after many years! As someone said to me recently, it's incredible that any of us survived to adulthood, whether despite our own foibles or the mistakes of our parents.

It's so appropriate at the end of the Christmas season, then, that we get the gospel we have today: of a “lost” Jesus in a direct head-to-head with his parents and family over where he's supposed to be and when. A moment we all know in our lives – perhaps from when we ourselves were young, aspiring adults; or when our children were. That this old familial conflict is older than we are, older even than the Holy Family is old. It's among the most human of moments, and it reminds us of the inevitability of conflict in every family, every community, every household we inhabit.

It's also a direct challenge to part of what one of our members calls, “Episcopal personality disorder-“ the tendency in our Christian tradition to avoid conflict when our agendas don't align or we find our gifts not in lock-step with those of our sisters and brothers in Christ. Our habitual tendency to avoid conflict makes us passive, or even passive-aggressive at times. How refreshing, then, that we are reminded that Christian communities are not above the dynamics of the Holy Family – the tears and annoyance that comes with authentic human relationship. The irritation of working alongside each other in close company, and the challenge of moving through conflict with the grace we have inherited, rather than shuffling it quietly off to the side and pretending it's unholy. Conflict can be an avenue of God's action in our midst, too. How true this must be for us, if it was true for Jesus, Mary, and Joseph on the way home from Jerusalem!

This is the only snapshot we have in scripture of Jesus' adolescence. I can imagine he's grown by this point out of the wooden toys littered around the floor of Joseph's carpenter shop in Nazareth. Maybe a project or two of his own are sitting half-finished on the shelves or in a neglected corner of the of the room. Jesus, like most budding young adults, is trying to find himself amidst the inheritance he has received, and perhaps that creeping sense that his calling is far from the lathes and chisels of Joseph's craft.

What's also fascinating is what the author of Luke omits. What was Jesus' relationship with Joseph, really? Joseph, who by all accounts was a devoted husband and father to his family, must have wondered at times, too; the mysterious way the child had been conceived and everything that had happened since then. Did Joseph feel side-lined, if not by God, simply by the strangeness of the situation? Or did he jump in with both feet, as tradition has it, and nurture Jesus very much as his own – an adoption out of love and respect for this precious life in their midst? At very least, Joseph, like all fathers, must have experienced the strange disconnects we all encounter with children as they get older – the impatience they must feel at being constrained by family custom and tradition when that insatiable desire to spread their own wings grows inside until it wants to burst out beyond the established boundaries of their parents.

Mary, no doubt, has been watching her first-born son carefully all these years. We can remember her treasuring the strange portents and encounters that marked his birth. We can imagine her anxieties and brooding over what this child will become as he grows into a man, as he sheds the innocence of childhood and begins to assert his own identity. And how does she discuss with Joseph the peculiar identity he is destined to carry? When does he cease to be their child and truly become God's child? And do they have any say in the matter? It's a great and mysterious thing that Mary has been honored by Christian tradition as *theotokos*, the God-bearer. For Mary, like all mothers, will never quite be able to see her son, even if he is the Son of God, as anyone other than her child, too intimately a part of her for words.

So in the brief, pithy dialogue of today's gospel narrative, we can hear the enormous emotional weight behind the words: the predictable struggle Jesus has as he discovers – as all young adults must – that they seem scarcely understood by their parents. The pain in Mary's voice as she holds back the tears of her anxieties and her worst fears when Jesus was not to be found amongst the entourage of relatives headed home from the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Perhaps even Joseph's muted but powerful presence, worried – a bit fearful and angry even – for his wife's emotional state and the precious life he has sworn to protect.

This is the story of God sanctifying those hardest of moments in families when we must articulate, no matter what age we are – when we must assert, even – our own unique identities and calling. And doing so somehow shatters or rearranges the old way of being in relationship, the old way of being a household together. And this is good news that God sanctifies, in Christ, these difficult times in our walk together as families and communities. When conflict erupts even in the most carefully monitored and tended of relationships. Because the Spirit *must* move, and we must grow beyond the nest, beyond the careful boundaries of our inheritance.

It is this tension that we get to call holy today. Holy, because it is a tension that the Holy Family inhabited; and for whatever reasons the author of Luke included this story, one of them might be that this tension is a given part of our lives together in our families – whether made by blood or baptism. And it's a reminder that God embraces our full humanity in relationship, even when we're tired and exasperated with one another and the children are restless or have wandered from our closely held agendas. This is, perhaps most importantly, among the first parts of our very human lives that Christ redeems, and gathers into God's heart as we bring it together as an offering into the house of the divine. And in doing so, perhaps we, too, grow a bit in wisdom and divine favor.