

Introduction:

Why do we come to church? What do you get from coming to church?

What sense of identity does church give to our children? Has this (or any other) church given you a sense of your own identity?

“Family Dynamics”

The Congregational Church of Hollis

Christmas 1C

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Luke 2:41-52

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We have just come through a season that is at once family-centered and yet often full of family tensions, from money problems to old hurts brought to new life, from pressures and misunderstandings to unfulfilled expectations and disillusionment. The people who love one another most disappoint and hurt one another most deeply.

The lovely image of shepherds and stars and angels singing in the night gives way only days later in our Scripture readings to anxious parents perplexed at their adolescent son's preoccupation with things above their understanding.

Will life ever be the same for any of them, or for us?

Of course, the answer to that question is simply, "no." Nothing will remain unchanged after the incarnation, including our family lives. And that is where the anguish and the perplexed hearts of Mary and Joseph share common ground with our own questions and pain.

In all of the gospel accounts contained in our Bible, this is the only one that has anything to say about the years when Jesus was a young person after we hear about his birth. But this story is excellent, because it's particularly reassuring for parents. Almost every parent I know has at least one moment of panic when they lose track of their child, when the child just disappears, as you've been absorbed in conversation or distracted by something else. And that horrifying moment of realizing your child is gone is followed by a frantic search and rescue operation, where you feel more alive and panicked than you have ever felt before in your life. Until you find that child, who almost always wonders why you're so upset.

It's very reassuring to go to this story in the Bible, where Jesus is so completely human in his response to his parents—because it shows that the Holy Family was not always picture-perfect family, not always harmoniously and smoothly ordered, without division or conflict. Mary and Joseph were upset with Jesus, and they let him know that. Just because he was God's Son didn't mean that he could get away with callous or thoughtless behavior! And Jesus was respected by his parents as being a young man who

had an identity of his own—they were concerned about what he was up to, but they understood when he explained why he had done what he did—although I imagine that they had a few other words to say on the way home, too! There were messy moments, but the good news is that God found ways to redeem even the messy moments as that family worked together to understand one another and to love one another more perfectly across their lives together.

Whether he thought about it or not at the time, Jesus was taking a risk when he chose to go to the Temple on that day when the rest of the family and camp were returning home, and he didn't remember to check in with anyone to let them know what he was doing. He was risking his family harmony in order to deepen his knowledge and understanding of God ... many of us jeopardize family harmony for far lesser things, don't we? And we often risk the family stability and harmony without even thinking about it; we get caught in patterns that are destructive, and we wind up hurting the people we love the most without fully understanding why we do it, or how we can change our behaviour. But it's important to believe that we must and we can, with God's help—that's part of the message of the Gospel. And that's one of the reasons why we come to church.

Church is a very special kind of family. Like your families at home, it's not perfect; some would say, far from it! But the thing about church family is that we come together to practice what it looks and feels like to seek God's will and to practice God's love with each other all the time. It's where we come to be taught and reminded by people who are better at loving than we ourselves are, and it's the place where we come to practice being able to accept and yes, even to love, people we don't particularly even *like* sometimes. Church is a place where we come to be accepted and loved even though we know that we aren't perfect ourselves, even though we know that others see our faults and failures as well as (sometimes better than!) we do. Because church families—that is, *healthy* church families—may have disagreements and conflicts, they may have frustrations and setbacks, but at the end of the day, healthy church families practice forgiveness for the thoughtless things that people say and do—but they also tell the truth to each other in loving ways that allow for room for people to change and grow.

I hope that this church family, and any church family you might become a part of, will always nurture your personal growth in understanding and in faith and knowledge of God and Jesus Christ. I hope that you always have the experience of being someone who is precious and loved here—and that doesn't mean that you get to do whatever you want or behave in selfish ways and expect people to just accept it, because real love knows when to say, 'That's unacceptable!' and will try to help you change. I hope that that's how each of us experiences life in church community, because I believe that that's what God wants for us and I believe that that's one of the many ways that the Spirit of Jesus Christ lives on in this place and through each of us.

May God bless this church family, and each member and friend of it, as we prepare to embark on a New Year in life and faith together. Amen.