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What Child IS This?

Luke 2: 41-52

Jesus has certainly had a busy week. He's grown from newborn to twelve year old in six days. While the Gospel of Thomas, a version that was not included in the canon of Scriptures, does offer a couple of childhood stories of Jesus performing miracles for his friends, this Luke text is the only story in the Bible we have of Jesus as a youth.

The family has traveled to Jerusalem, the capital, for pilgrimage and on the way home they realize Jesus is not with them. Perhaps you too have wondered how you could overlook one of your children for a couple of days but the scriptures tell us they would not have been traveling as a single family unit. They would have been with an entire tribe of people and it would have been easy to assume Jesus was walking with some of his cousins or uncles, only later realizing he has been left behind. Mary and Joseph, as you can imagine, are frantic. Their first born is lost and, just to add a little more guilt, quite a few people have informed them that he's pretty important. When they finally find him he seems shocked at their concern for didn't they know he'd be in his Father's house? Or as other translations read, About his Father's business? Now as you heard the passage read I hope you did not let the formality of our setting keep you from catching the tone. Jesus is no longer an infant, meek and mild. He is twelve years old and any of us who have dealt with a twelve year old knows how Mary and Joseph are really feeling.

The writer Anne Lamott, in her book *Plan B*, compares our Luke passage to life with her teenage son, Sam:

We meet Jesus, in the Bible, at twelve, when he's speaking to the elders in the Temple. He's great with the elders, just as Sam is always fabulous with other grown-ups. They can't believe he's such an easygoing kid, with such good manners. In the Temple, Jesus says things so profound that the elders are amazed...But at the same time he's blowing the elders away, how is Jesus treating his parents? I'll tell you: He's making them crazy. He's ditched them. They can't find him for three days. Some of you know what it's like to not find your kid for three hours. You die. Mary and Joseph have looked everywhere, in the market, at the video arcade. Finally they find him, in the last place they thought to look—the Temple. And immediately, he mouths off: Oh, sorry, sorry, I was busy doing all this other stuff, my father's work. Like, Joseph, you're not my real father—you're not the boss of me.

Talk about family values! The fact is this is not the only time Jesus will brush aside his family for his work. When his mother and brothers come to visit him he refuses to speak to them and declares he has a new family in his followers. He prophesies that he has not come to bring people together but to break apart families—father against son, daughter against mother. He teaches his disciples that marriage would hinder his plans. He even scoffs at a man who wishes to bury his father before he follows Jesus saying, "Let the dead bury the dead." Family values indeed. Throughout his ministry

Jesus refuses to stay within our lines and say only what we would like to hear. So while our families might be heralded above all else, this is not so for Jesus.

This may be very bad news. For those of us who have loving, gracious, upright and faithful families we may very well leave here today offended by Jesus. But for any of us who have found family lacking, perhaps in small ways only or perhaps in every fundamental way, this is quite good news from Jesus. In his, not so traditional, family values, he shows us that the family we are born into does not have to be the family we follow. If we have been given a family that fights or that hurts or that ignores Jesus makes the offer of another family. We do not have to stay in a family that keeps us from the life God wants for us. In fact, Jesus wants to come in between those kinds of families—father against son and daughter against mother. Part of the reason for his existence is to break apart unfaithful structures, even family structures, so that a new life can begin.

For those of us whose families have nurtured us and helped us grow we are not off the hook completely here for no family is perfect and we too face times when our families could be stronger or more faithful. In our cases we should not cut one another off but we should call one another to greater faithfulness. Jesus is not anti-family but he only values family that enables us to love and follow God. We are not off the hook completely for another reason too, for even if family is not our issue, not our barrier that keeps God at a distance, Jesus knows us and he finds whatever barriers we do have and he seeks to knock them down. In doing so, he will probably offend us.

I've been thinking a great deal about why we love Christmas so much. There are the many important and faithful reasons the season has power for us but I wonder if there is not at least one small, less helpful reason we love Christmas as well. At Christmas Jesus is an infant. He is cute, soft, cuddly...and manageable. But Christmas has faded and a New Year is beginning. We have heavy questions that face us this time of year: who will I be in this coming year? Who will I follow? Will I be honest? Will I be faithful? As we face answering these questions we should be keenly aware that if we wish to follow Jesus we can expect many things but we cannot expect to control him. The baby has grown up and he calls us to faith that makes us uncomfortable. He calls us to a radical life that could offend us. Just as his family values may not match ours, neither may his stance on poverty or morality or money.

What child is this?, we might rightly ask. What child is this who demands so much from me, who has grown unmanageable? This child is both our brother and our Lord. Following him will at times be difficult and confusing but, if we follow him we know one very important thing. We know that the work we do will not be in vain for in following him, our brother, we will not go astray. Our work, our lives, will have meaning and purpose for we too will be about our Father's business. Amen.