

Sermon 1st Sunday after Christmas 26 December 2021

Luke 2:41-52

St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth

Greg Bensted

Grace, peace, and Christmas joy to you from God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" Let's pray...

As parents, relatives, teachers, guardians, and friends of children we are, and rightfully should be, concerned for their well-being. We're commissioned with protecting and teaching them, nurturing and nourishing their lives, ensuring their health and safety. We all need someone to guide and guard our growing up, because growing up is hard work.

Growing up means working out who we are and figuring out our place in this world. It involves creating relationships, making decisions, setting priorities, learning boundaries, and navigating the myriad values and beliefs that impact and shape our lives. This includes making mistakes, getting lost, pedalling in reverse, and sometimes just needing to start again from scratch. For most people, growing up eventually means moving out and establishing a new home. This may or may not be a geographical move, but it always involves an adjustment in our psychological and spiritual perspectives.

So, imagine Mary's distress when she discovers that her 12-year-old boy has gone A.W.O.L. In a panic, she and Joseph search desperately for Jesus, and three days later the one who was lost is found. Like all caring mums, Mary begins her interrogation, "Child, why have you treated us like this?" Now, we're not accustomed to speaking this way, are we? We'd probably say something along the lines of, "Where have you been young man? Your father and I didn't survive visits from angels, birth in a manger, and living like refugees in Egypt to have you wandering off and getting lost in Jerusalem." ... But Jesus isn't the one who's lost. He knows who he is and where he belongs. Mary and Joseph are the ones who don't understand.

Today's gospel is a story about growing up but it's not about Jesus growing up. It's about Mary and Joseph growing up. It's about you and I growing up. Growing up isn't about how old we are. It's about developing deeper relationships with God, our world, each other, and knowing who, and should I say, whose, we truly are.

Jesus is the one who grows us up just as he did Mary and Joseph. Children have a way of doing that to us. They challenge us to look at our world, our lives, and ourselves in new, different, sometimes painful, and sometimes playful ways. That's precisely what Jesus' question to Mary does. She had put herself and Joseph at the centre of Jesus' world, but his response reorients her thinking.

"Why were you searching for me?" he asks. "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" In effect, Jesus tells Mary that she should have known where he was. It's as though he's saying, "Remember, the angel told you I'd be the Son of God. Remember that night in Bethlehem. Angels praising God, shepherds glorifying God. Remember the three men from the East, their gifts, and adoration. Remember Joseph's dreams that guided us to Egypt and back. Where else could I be but here?" Jesus puts the Father at the centre of his world and asks Mary, Joseph and all of us to do the same. Jesus reminds us by asking, "Have you forgotten that you belong in my Father's home?"

Genuine, authentic growth always requires letting go. Mary's move to the Father's house, her growing up, means that she'll have to let go of her "boy Jesus" [Luke 2:43] image. Jesus was born of Mary but he is the Father's Son. He is with her but doesn't belong to her. She can give him love but not her thoughts or ways. Jesus is about the Father's business. Ultimately, Mary must strive to be like Jesus.

Jesus has moved from Mary and Joseph's home to the Father's home. Jesus hasn't rejected his earthly parents but re-prioritised relationships. He will ask Simon and Andrew, James and John [Matthew 4] to do the same. "Follow me" will be his invitation for them to leave their homes, their nets, their parents and move to a different place, live a different life, see things differently. "Follow me" is his invitation to us today, too.

Growing up spiritually involves leaving our comfort zone, letting go of what's safe and familiar, and moving to a bigger place, an expansive place; to the Father's place. It's necessary to let go and detach if we're to grow in the love and likeness of Christ. It means leaving our familiar little homes and taking big strides of faith.

And honestly, I struggle to understand why so many people resist doing this. So many people live in homes ruled by fear, anger, and prejudice. Homes suffocated by grief and sorrow. Homes that convince people that they don't matter, that they're not enough, unacceptable, or unlovable. Homes in which they continue to be hurt or wounded. Homes of indifference and apathy. Homes of guilt and shame. Homes of gossip, envy, pride.

The problem is that we become too comfortable in these homes. They're not our true homes. They're not the home God offers us. Sometimes it's necessary to pass through them but we don't have to stay there.

Jesus knows that there's not only another home for us but invites, guides, and grows us up into it. It's a place he knows well. It's the Father's home in which we're free to know ourselves and each other as his beloved children, created in his image and called to be like him. So why would we continue to pay rent on a place that impoverishes us when we're invited to sponge off the Father for free? In the Father's home, everyone has a seat at the banquet table. And the Father's home is filled with rooms of mercy, forgiveness, joy, love, beauty, generosity, compassion, energy, and life.

Leaving home doesn't necessarily mean leaving our physical or geographical home. It does mean examining and re-prioritising the values, beliefs, and relationships that establish our identity and give our life meaning, significance, and purpose.

It means letting go of an identity that's limited to our biological family, job, reputation, ethnicity, or political persuasion, and trusting that who we are is who we are in God. It means that we stop comparing, competing, and judging, and begin relating through love, self-surrender, and vulnerability. It means that we stop dwelling on past guilt, regrets, and sins and accept the mercy and forgiveness of God and each other. It means being aware that God is always with us in the present. And it means letting go of fear about the future

by remembering that God is already there and all will be well. We are in our Father's home when our anxiety takes a back seat to peace, and we see our life not in opposition to others but as intimately related to and dependent upon others.

"Child, why have you treated us like this?" is a wonderful and searching question because of its recipient and his response. "Child, why have you treated us like this?"

"Because" Jesus says, "I love you. I love you enough to grow you up, to find you when you're lost, and to bring you with me into the Father's home." Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.