

## **Sermon: The Perfect Family**

Year C, Christmas 1

[1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Psalm 148; Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2:41-52](#)

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Rev. Catherine A. Merrill

You took your eye off the kid for two seconds, just two seconds, and you lost him in the mall. You weren't being a bad parent, and the kid wasn't being a bad kid, but somehow you got separated. As the responsible adult, your brain both starts racing and slowing down. Whatever soundtrack was playing in your head the instant before, now all you can hear is the newscasters and all the awful things they say in situations like this. In the story, Jesus is 12. People back then were parents by the time they were 15 or 16, just like now, so 12 isn't a little kid. But it's not a full adult either. And anyway, you came together; you're supposed to leave together. It's a new place; it's super crowded, you don't really have a plan if you get separated. For Mary and Joseph, it's been three days of living with that feeling.

Your eyes scan. And you see him. And what do you do? You run over and you hug him. And kiss him. And you want to shake him and yell at him and spank him. You want to laugh and shout and do a hundred contradictory things at once. And there's the part where you're out in public and whatever you want to do, everyone is going to see you do it. So you're doing everything in one of those shouting whispers.

Welcome to the Feast Day of the Holy Family. We have an image of Jesus and his family being perfect. On this day, we have a mother saying, "Why have you treated us like this?" We have a son saying, "Didn't know where I would be?" We have basically an obedient and devout boy claiming his own space as a man. We have parents not sure about this claim their kid is making. They were a perfect family the way we are all in perfect families.

For many of us, Christmas is a time when families get together. It can be wonderful to have everyone under one roof again. It can be. And for some folks, 48 hours is great and the 49<sup>th</sup> hour pretty much brings sharp words and hurt feelings. Or maybe there's just no way to be with your dad. Perhaps Alzheimer's has made Christmas Present into a Ghost of Christmas Past, where all anyone can see is what the family has lost. Perhaps there's a cousin or aunt or brother-in-law that's just impossible, who delights in getting everyone all stirred up. Or there's someone who wants to talk about politics or religion or football when everyone else always politely changes the topic of conversation for the 43<sup>rd</sup> time. Maybe it's just the two of you, or just the one of you, and all of a sudden there are people everywhere and no one, *no one*, apparently has the hand/eye coordination to replace the paper towels. You're so glad to see your grandkids, but all you've seen is the top of their heads as they stare down at their phones now that you've given them the Wi-Fi password. This isn't the family time you had in mind.

Or maybe it's just the sum of everything you've been through to get to Christmas Day. I was in high school before my next youngest cousin was born. One of my dad's brothers said that he never understood my dad on Christmas afternoon. My dad would be stomping from my grandparents' house to the car muttering under his breath about putting the blank-blank kids in the blank-blank car with the blank-blank presents and going home. My uncle said he finally understood it when he was muttering about his own blank-blank kids in the blank-blank car with the blank-blank presents and going to his own blank-blank home.

Welcome to the Feast Day of the Holy Family. Who do we have the most searing arguments with? Where does our anger rise the hottest and the need to be right and have the last word seem the most important? Yeah. With those we spend a lot of time with; with those who share our memories and a coherent purpose.<sup>1</sup>

So how do we take part in this Feast of our Family, which is far from holy and has the capacity to drive us crazy? Paul tells the Colossians that they should clothe themselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. OK, fine. Paul has not met your son-in-law. And honestly, the reason you've made it to 48 hours is because you have put kindness and patience on top of your anger and frustration and shame and confusion over how such a lovely child as yours has picked such a loser. Is it that Paul is recommending that we just get better at hiding what we truly feel? Or better at faking what we feel?

There's something in this clothes image. Think about coming here this morning. You put your coat on. Maybe it was warm from being in the house, but it probably wasn't as warm as you were. You wear it for a while and while you warm up the coat, what's actually keeping you warm is the layer of air trapped between you and the coat. The coat isn't making you warm. The coat is keeping your own natural warmth from escaping. So long as the outside of the coat keeps the cold and wet away, you'll stay warm to the core because the coat is trapping that warm layer of air.

One way to look at it is that if you put on some admittedly fake patience, you might be able to trap some real patience from escaping. And if you could layer up enough compassion, kindness, humility, meekness with that patience, maybe all those different layers can keep something vaguely Christian from dissipating out into the atmosphere.

But if the goal is love, with an intervening stop at forgiveness, then piling on tissue thin layers of virtues you don't really feel isn't going to work for very long. We have that rotten phrase, "Forgive and Forget".<sup>2</sup> That's not real forgiveness, it's I-don't-want-to-talk-about-it-any-more. If we are supposed to forgive each other as God has forgiven us, then I really don't want to forgive and forget with anyone, because I don't want God to forget me after God has forgiven me for the 17<sup>th</sup> time today.

Forgiveness happens when there is a real offense that caused a real injury, an injury that caused a moral debt. It's not right to seek to be the victim or to look for vengeance, you can't go looking to accrue moral debts. When you forgive someone you are releasing them from the debt they owe you (forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors). The offense has damaged the relationship and even if we forgive someone, that does not remove the real consequences of having committed the offense. Forgiveness is trying to create a space where reconciliation and the restoration of a trusting relationship can happen.<sup>3</sup> And sometimes the person who has offended you cannot accept your forgiveness. Or the consequences of the offense simply do not permit a trusting relationship to be restored. It's just not possible in this world. It will have to wait for the next.

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth L. Sehested, "First Sunday after Christmas, Pastoral Perspective, Colossians 3:12-17" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009], 160.

<sup>2</sup> Sehested, p. 162.

<sup>3</sup> Randy A. Nelson, "Exegeting Forgiveness." *American Theological Inquiry (Online)* 5, no. 2 (July 15, 2012): 33.

So why try to live with these virtues, especially if they are going to cause your blood pressure to go sky high when you try to fake it 'til you make it? The warmth you are trying to trap beneath those virtues, the thing you're trying to keep ahold of, is your sense of who God has made you to be. When we see Jesus teaching at the Temple as a 12 year old and amazing everyone, we're not seeing him having just woken up with some sudden inspiration of being the son of God. He's been the Son of God since the beginning.<sup>4</sup> The capital B beginning of time. He's known that all along. What is happening in today's story is that everyone else is seeing it and having to adjust their mindsets. And that always causes friction. The thing is, after Mary yelled at him for frightening her so, she looks at the boy turning to the man, she hears his claim about being among his Father's people instead of among the earthly relations she and Joseph had been badgering, she sees how people are amazed at his teaching, and she treasures all these things in her heart. She keeps these things warm on the inside, close to whom God has created her to be.

It's hard to be whom God created you to be. You do tend to amaze and astonish people. You do tend to frighten those whom you love. You do tend to have almost nothing between you and the cold and wet of the outside world that wants all of us to be less than who we were created to be.

It's hard to watch someone being who God created them to be because of all that. But as parents, as loving adults in young people's lives, we're supposed to work on being whom God created us to be while treasuring others' struggles to find who God created them to be. And yes, often times their struggles are really annoying. And yes, often times, our parents have no interest in anyone being anything other than perfect in some external, artificial, tissue thin definition of perfect that's really only worth forgetting.

When we are being whom God created us to be, it doesn't stay trapped on the inside. It lights up the layers of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Forgiveness happens. Love shines forth. We increase in wisdom and in years. We increase in divine and human favor. We become more like Jesus. Not perfect. But a thankful member of his Holy Family.

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<sup>4</sup> Karen Chakoian, "Luke 2:41-52." *Interpretation* 52, no. 2 (April 1998): 187.