

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I hope you all had a really Merry Christmas. Tonight we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family. I'm sure the Church put this feast on the calendar to encourage us to work at making our families holy. But when you consider what's in our Gospel text, I'm not sure this is a very encouraging model for our families.

The Holy Family had apparently traveled 80 miles from Nazareth to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. That would take approximately four days to walk so they would have left Nazareth on a Tuesday morning to arrive in Jerusalem before sundown on Friday, which would mark the beginning of Passover. Passover would last until sundown on Saturday so they probably would have begun the journey home on Sunday morning, expecting to get home on Wednesday. They would not have traveled alone, but together with other family members and townsfolk from Nazareth. People being people, the men probably walked together talking about their work or ranting about the Roman occupation of their land or bragging about recent fishing trips to the Sea of Galilee. The women talked about what they would prepare for the evening meal or what was going on the lives of their children or their concern for their elderly parents. And the children ran around playing games or chasing an occasional rabbit.

Now, according to St. Luke, this caravan of people had traveled for a full day, about 20 miles. How is it that neither Joseph nor Mary checked on the whereabouts or the well-being of their twelve year old son in all that time, over such a long distance? What were they thinking? They don't seem to be terribly responsible parents, do they?

Now, let's consider Jesus for a moment. He was twelve years old, a pre-teen who was somewhat precocious. He probably had already developed the "teen tudes". He apparently wasn't too concerned about his parents. He obviously didn't see any need to check in with them. So he just went his own way. He apparently was very smart, but to sit down with the elders in the Temple, he had to be somewhat arrogant, maybe showing off a little bit and kind of full of himself. He doesn't sound like the perfect kid, does he?

When Joseph and Mary realize that he's not to be found in the caravan, they ran back to Jerusalem. They probably waited until Monday morning, hoping he would show up. Besides it would have been dangerous traveling alone at night with hills filled with wild animals and marauding robbers. So, leaving at sun-up, they probably arrived in Jerusalem about sundown that evening.

Luke tells us "after three days they found him in the temple". Think about that, parents. Their son had been missing for four days. Has a child of yours ever wandered away in a mall or department store for ten minutes? How frantic were you? Imagine your child missing for four days! You would be in total panic. Mary and Joseph had to be out of their minds with worry.

Finally, they see him “sitting in the midst of the teachers” in the Temple.

I remember one summer in Ocean City, New Jersey. I don't think I was 12, maybe 8 or 9. I wandered the beach all day, collectiong bottles to turn in and collect 2 cents each, so I would have money for the rides and arcade on the boardwalk that night. See, I was hustling for money even way back then. It never occurred to me that my parents were looking for me or that they were worried about me. I only thought about having a fun night on the boardwalk. When my Mother saw me as she stood on the boardwalk, she came running toward me, crying her heart out. She hugged me, thanked God I was safe, and then tore into me. My Father came walking slowly and deliberately toward me, looked down at me, looking like the wrath of God. Wearing only a bathing suit, I had tied my sneaks together hung them around my neck to put my pennies in. I said as I handed him my sneakers, “Look, Dad, I made all this money. He looked in the sneaks, saw the pennies, shook his head, and said, “Let's go home.”

I suspect that was very much Mary's reaction. Luke has her saying, “Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety.” I'm sure those words were spoken through a flood of tears, as she wrapped her arms around him.

Jesus responds with seemingly, typical “teen tudes”, “Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?” Luke tells us, “But they did not understand what he said to them.”

I don't think there was much of an attempt to “understand what he said to them”, rather I surmise that Joseph picked him up in his strong, carpenter arm, scowled at the teachers in the Temple, and said, “Let's go home”.

But, by then it was Thursday night. Passover would begin on Friday. So, they were stuck in Jerusalem again until the next Sunday morning. It would have cost them more money to stay there. Joseph would have lost a whole week's worth of work. Don't you think he was more than a little peeved? St. Luke sure doesn't tell us what St. Joseph had to say to Jesus, but I'll bet it wasn't fit for print.

No wonder St. Luke ends this episode in the life of Jesus saying, “He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them”. Mary may have “kept all these things in her heart”, but Joseph sure made it known to Jesus that he was the Father and he was in his house and he had better be obedient or else.

So, “Jesus advanced in wisdom and age and favor before God and man.”

Now, when we break it down like that, does that sound like a Holy Family or does it sound like your family? The truth is that it is both. The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph was just like your family and mine.

There are ups and downs in every family. You parents often feel all kinds of anxieties with regard to your children and even whether or not you are being good parents. And children, all-to-often, you are mindless and without consideration for your parents and how much they suffer because of you. But, as you struggle through the many difficulties that life presents to you and you present to one another, as long as you keep respecting each other and loving one another, yours too really is becoming a Holy Family.