

WIDENING THE CIRCLE  
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Text: Luke 2:41-52

Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him.

After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. 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?" But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

**T**his morning we hear the one and only story about Jesus' boyhood anywhere in the canonical gospels, and it introduces some themes that Luke will continue to develop. One of those themes is how we define the boundaries of family. Who's considered family, and who's not? How far do we extend that line? This is a big issue for Luke because ultimately it has to do with what it means to be the church. And we'll get into that, but let's start with the story itself.

The story opens with Jesus, Mary and Joseph on their way to Jerusalem for Passover, and at this point, there's no mention of anyone else traveling with

them. All Luke says is, "every year his parents went to Jerusalem," and "when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual." So, we start off with Jesus' nuclear family, and that's it. That's where the line is drawn initially. But the circle quickly begins to widen, and the definition begins to expand.

The three of them stay for the festival, and when it's over, Mary and Joseph head home, thinking that Jesus is right there with them. But after they've been on the road for a whole day, they suddenly realize, Wait a minute! Where's Jesus! Which is kind of hard to fathom. How could any parent be that neglectful? When my brother was little,

my mother took him shopping at a department store in Pittsburgh, and he wandered off. But he wasn't gone for more than a minute before she noticed he was missing and started yelling for help.

But before we decide that Mary and Joseph are the worst parents ever, there is a reasonable explanation, and it's right there in the story. On the way home, Luke says, Mary and Joseph are traveling with a bunch of relatives and friends—people they know and trust. So, they're probably not paying close attention to Jesus because they assume he's around somewhere, and someone's keeping an eye on him.

But the thing to notice here is that the circle gets wider. It's like a movie that opens with a close-up shot of Mary and Joseph, walking along with their son; and then the camera pulls back to reveal all these other family members— aunts, uncles, cousins, whoever. And not only that, but the picture also includes people who aren't even related by blood—friends, neighbors, maybe some other travelers they've met along the way.

But we're not done yet. The circle gets even wider when Mary and Joseph go back to Jerusalem to look for Jesus, and after three days they find him sitting in the temple with a bunch of rabbis, calmly discussing the theology. Of course, they're not real happy with him, just like my mother was not real happy with my brother when, after locking down the store and searching for him for an hour, a police officer found him sitting in one of the ladies' dressing rooms, playing with his G. I. Joe doll. Mary looks at Jesus and says, Why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been going out of our minds!

But the funny thing is, Jesus seems genuinely confused by her reaction. He looks at her and says, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"—as though this is the most natural place in the world for him to be; as though the temple is an extension of his home, and everyone there is his brother or sister.

So, by the end of the story, the boundaries of family have been extended pretty far. They now include the temple leaders and the whole religious community. And that's as far as it goes for now, but as the gospel continues, Luke keeps widening the circle until eventually we hear Jesus proclaim "the good news of God's embrace to all within the sound of his voice"—meaning that anyone who hears his words is part of his family. It's an understanding that goes way beyond the understanding most of us have. For Jesus, family is more than just who you're related to biologically, it's more than just who you're familiar with, it's more than just who you feel comfortable around. What truly connects us, what truly makes us one, is the faith that we share.

And it makes total sense that Luke would want to emphasize that, given who his audience was—a bunch of Jewish Christians trying to figure out how to welcome a bunch of Gentile converts into their church and somehow form a community where people from totally different backgrounds see each other, above all, as sisters and brothers in Christ.

That's not an easy thing to do. It doesn't just happen by itself. It takes a lot of effort. You have to be intentional about it. And it's not something you're ever done with. You're always working

at it because churches are always changing. People are always coming and going. And when new people arrive, they bring with them their own stories, their own experiences, their own needs, their own gifts. And it's up to everyone else to widen the circle and include them—to welcome all that they bring and all that they are and make them part of the family. Because no matter how different we are, we all have this one thing in common: We're all drawn to this person, Jesus, whose voice we've all somehow managed to hear in our lives. And that's enough, Luke is saying. That's enough to make us one.

So, when that police officer finally found my brother, he looked down at him and said, "David, are you lost?" My brother shook his head and replied, "I'm not lost. My mother is." Then the officer took him by the hand and brought him out to my mother, who scooped him up in her arms and brought him home.

I think that's a good way to think about what the church is and what it means to us. Because the truth is, we're all kind of lost. We're all kind of wandering through life, not quite sure where we are or how we got here. But this is the place where we come to be found. This is the place where we come to be called by our name. This is the place where we come to be re-connected, gathered up, and loved. Amen.