

Opening Prayer: Gracious and eternal God, we gather this day by the call of your Spirit so that our eyes may be healed, so that we may see things as they really are, that we may see the provision of your goodness in the flowers of the fields and the birds of the air, see the provision of your goodness that you have made for us all in this wondrous world, and in seeing the truth of things all around us each and every day that we would rest content in the sure knowledge that our life is more than the food we eat, and our bodies more than clothes we wear.

Faithful and holy God, gathered by your Spirit, pour out your Spirit upon us and lift up our hearts, so that we may set our hearts on your kingdom and justice as first priority before everything else and as the Church of Jesus Christ gathered that we may worship you this day in Spirit and in Truth!

In Jesus name we pray...AMEN!

Well, it has been a few weeks since I have had the honor of standing here before you and addressing you as your pastor from the Scriptures.¹ It is a great privilege to do so, and I've missed it and you, though I trust you enjoyed meeting a couple of my pastoral colleagues this past month. But I'm back now and, as I often say to my wife Diane: "*You're stuck with me kid, so you might as well get used to it!*"

While I've missed most of Advent and our Christmas Eve service, I'm back just in time to celebrate the twelve (12) days of Christmas. Next Sunday, on January 6th, we will officially move into Epiphany. But today we linger for

¹ I had eye surgery for a detached retina on December 5th and wasn't released to return to pastoral life until December 26th.

just a while longer in Christmas. And as is true throughout our culture in general, Christmas is a season of family gatherings. My guess is that most of you have gotten together with family members over the holiday season.

Well, this is also true of our Scripture readings today. And though we don't read them all, you might be interested to know that the Old Testament lessons from the Common Lectionary both have to do with family life.² And this emphasis upon family life follows us into the gospel text today, which is from Luke 2, and tells us of Jesus' *Bar Mitzvah* during the Passover in Jerusalem.³

Bar Mitzvah is the celebration of a young boy, usually about twelve (12) or so years old, now credited as being old enough to be responsible before God for keeping the law. The words actually mean "*son of the commandment*" and it is a time of family celebration. For young girls it is called a *Bat Mitzvah*, and it means the same for them.⁴

Diane and I attended the *Bar Mitzvah* of her cousin Lester Lewis years ago. We first gathered in the Synagogue for a traditional Jewish worship service involving readings from the Torah. After each of the boys read their text in Hebrew they then had to translate it, give its interpretation and finally tell us what

² Cf. I Samuel 2: 18-20; 26, and Ecclesiastes 3: 3-7; 14-17. In I Samuel we are told of the gifted and discerning young Samuel ministering before the Lord, and in Ecclesiastes we are told of the duty of children to honor their parents.

³ The tradition of celebrating a boy's coming of age or "*bar mitzvah*" was developed in medieval Europe. So, strictly speaking, Jesus did not have a bar mitzvah. However, once Jewish boys reached puberty they were considered old enough to participate fully in the liturgical rituals associated with the Jewish Torah. Once they reached age twenty (20) they were considered old enough to serve in the military (cf. Numbers 1:2 – 3).

⁴ Bar is Aramaic for son, while Bat is Hebrew for daughter. The Hebrew for son is Ben. As to why Aramaic is used for males and Hebrew for females, the answer can be summed up in a single word: tradition!

the text meant for them personally. Following the service there was a lavish banquet with tables of food, wine, music and dancing. A lot of toasts were made by fathers of their sons, and a lot of wine was drunk. By the end of the festivities, everyone was smiling and virtually everyone was dancing.

Now that's what a traditional *Bar Mitzvah* is like, but by traditional I am speaking only of what has been the case since medieval times. This formal ritual marking the transition from childhood to adulthood is only about eight hundred years old. So, technically speaking, I misspoke a moment ago when I said that our text from Luke 2 is telling us of Jesus' *Bar Mitzvah*. But you'll have to forgive me for that because I've been out of the pulpit for a few weeks and I'm a little rusty.

But, then again, kicking off the rust just a bit, I would note in my defense that even though the traditional *Bar Mitzvah* ritual that we know today wasn't observed as such in Jesus' day, the transition to adulthood was not unnoticed or ignored either. It has always been observed, usually with the onset of puberty. And inviting a young person to read the Torah and then comment upon it is the essence of the transition that a modern *Bar Mitzvah* celebration has ritualized.

And so, while I'm not sure of the particulars as to how Jesus celebrated this natural transition, I'm pretty sure that when Luke spoke to Mary about her early years with Jesus that Mary related this particular story because it embodied this very traditional meaning for both her and Jesus. I'm pretty sure about all of this because in the text I'm about to read Jesus says as much. I may be reading between the lines, but not very much.

And so we'll approach this text today as narrating Jesus' *Bar Mitzvah* even if the way this has been celebrated through the ages has no doubt changed. The text tells us that Jesus

and his family were in Jerusalem during the season of Passover, which was a very crowded time to be in Jerusalem. Jerusalem at this time in history had a population of about a half million. But during the Passover season it swelled to well over a million because Passover was one of three (3) pilgrimage festivals described in the Torah.

“Three times a year shall all your men appear before the Lord your God in the place that God will choose [referring presumably to the Temple in Jerusalem], on the festivals of Pesah (Passover), Shavuot (the Feast of Weeks), and Sukkot (the Festival of Booths). They shall not appear empty handed. Each shall bring his own gift, appropriate to the blessing which the Lord your God has given you.”⁵

During the Passover festival the temple priests and members of the Sanhedrin council gathered in the temple courtyard where they would hold public lectures and answer questions. And while most Jews only stayed in Jerusalem for a couple of days, the festival itself lasted eight (8) days.

And yet for all of the festivity, for all of the joyous greetings, for all of the dancing and singing, for all the toasts and the hugs from family members, there is a very stern and serious side to Jesus' *Bar Mitzvah* that we dare not overlook. And Jesus made sure that Mary in particular remembered this truth. Jesus made sure that his mother would not forget what his *Bar Mitzvah* would entail for him in particular. Jesus made sure that the more

⁵ Deuteronomy 16:16. Passover is a celebration of Israel's exodus from Egypt. The Feast of Weeks is an agricultural festival celebrated seven (7) weeks after Passover, i.e., Pentecost. And the Festival of Booths celebrates Israel's dependence upon God during her forty (40) years of wandering in the dessert. It begins five (5) days after Yom Kippur and concurrent with the onset of the winter rains.

serious side of his becoming a son of the commandments of God would register with her.

And how did he do that? He stayed behind in Jerusalem even when His family had packed up and left town. Now I don't know altogether how He got away with this without being noticed, but I really don't think Mary was so negligent that she simply ignored Jesus' whereabouts. Reading between the lines a little, my guess is that He was with the family in the morning, but as they made their final arrangements to leave Jerusalem Jesus drifted away. They did not find that problematic and just assumed He was visiting with extended family and/or relatives in the caravan.

And reading between the lines a little more, my guess is that Mary and Joseph really had never had cause to be too worried about where Jesus was and what He was doing. And yet, I suspect as the day wore on they inquired here and there about Jesus' whereabouts, soon realizing that he was nowhere to be found. Then they began to worry. My guess is that when Jesus didn't show up for supper, they knew something was clearly wrong.

But by then it was too late. They would have to return to Jerusalem, and begin their search for Jesus. And it took three (3) days for them to locate Him. Now ask yourselves, just how worried would you be after a three (3) day search? How upset? How frantic?

So I think we can all appreciate Mary's distress, and why this particular Passover visit to Jerusalem was burned into her memory. So when Luke would one day ask her about Jesus' childhood she would naturally say: "*Well, there was this one time...*"

But this was not mischievousness on Jesus' part. This was a calculated move. He was determined to drive home a very important truth, and the occasion of his *Bar Mitzvah* was as good a time as any. Let's read the account

and then ponder what truth it was Jesus was determined that Mary, and also we, would know.

READ LUKE 2: 41 – 52

I'd have to say that at first glance Mary's words "*Why have you treated us like this?*" make much more immediate sense to us than Jesus' words, "*I must be about my Father's business.*" Mary's words are straight-forward and filled with understandable maternal emotion. But Jesus' words are more complex. He counters her natural maternal concerns with an intellectual query. He turns around her anxiety about his whereabouts with an implied rebuke that she has only herself to blame.

In other words, Jesus makes no apology to Mary. He doesn't make excuses and He doesn't soften His words. He justifies Himself and rebukes Mary. In short, he puts her in her place. Why would Jesus act this sternly?

Well, as a newly minted son of the commandments of God, Jesus is lifting up the stern, serious side of all family obligations, captured nicely by a quote from one of Kahlil Gibran's poems about children in which he says "*Your children are not your children.*"⁶ That's what Jesus was saying to Mary. I'm your son, but I am not merely your son. I am now, more than ever, a son of the commandments of God.

My loyalties, my obligations, my duties, my obedience begins there. First things first! Yes, the commandments of God say "*Honor thy father and thy mother.*" But before it says that, it says "*Have no other gods before me.*"

So Jesus is differentiating himself to Mary as a man from a boy, and He is doing so by His seeking first the Kingdom of God as His first priority and letting all other loyalties, all other

⁶ "*On Children*" by Kahlil Gibran, **The Prophet** (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Publisher, 1986), p. 17.

obligations and duties take their rank beneath this most ultimate claim.

You might say that this is Jesus' way of teaching Mary that anyone who loves father or mother more than God is not worthy of God, and that when a higher duty calls you let the dead bury the dead.⁷ This is how Jesus taught His disciples that family loyalty only goes so far. Remember, as Jesus also taught, it is not at all uncommon that one's enemies may well arise from within one's household.⁸

So Jesus is putting all family life obligations within the larger context of His spiritual vocation, and He did not mince words with Mary. He knew that sentimentality could not soften His words or keep Him from sharing the hard truth He had to share with Mary. She had to be able to see that as a man, as a son of the commandments of God, He would have to leave His family one day and make His way on His own.

Now there is something normal about such a development. We all expect our children will eventually fly from the nest we have lovingly feathered for them. No parent should ever try to trap their children and keep them within the orbit of their life, their needs, their wants. Parents release their children to go into the world in the strength of their love and with their blessing. In a manner of speaking, parents make it possible for their children "*to leave and cleave*" and start their own family traditions.

But Jesus is only twelve (12) years old. He may have had His *Bar Mitzvah*, but He's much too young to leave home just yet. But that day was coming, and sooner than Mary probably wanted to admit.

Jesus returned that day with his family to Nazareth. But there would come a day when he would put His hand to the plough and not look back. There would come a day in His ministry when Jesus will be told that His family is outside asking for Him and He will turn and say to His disciples:

*"Who are my mother and my brothers and sisters? Those who do the will of God are my brother, my sister, my mother."*⁹

The claim of God upon His life would one day displace Mary's claim. And at Jesus' *Bar Mitzvah* at age twelve (12) He began to teach her that her days as a mother, her days of directing Jesus' steps, were numbered.

The lesson Jesus was teaching Mary that day long ago are lessons that we all still need to learn. They are lessons in limits, specifically a lesson on the limits of family.

Now I suspect we have all tasted something of the bitter-sweet truth that "*our children are not our children.*" And I suspect that we have all looked around holiday dinner tables at one time or another and taken note of how our families have grown and changed through the years. And I suppose we have all felt the pang of how brief, how limited our times together as family really are.

Yes, these are limits of a sort. These are the natural limits of life, limits imposed by time and distance that we cannot change. But Jesus' lesson goes deeper still. It is about a limit on our loyalty, specifically a limit on our family loyalty.

Now what I'm about say is somewhat paradoxical because even with my bad eye I can read the fifth commandment back there on the wall "*Honor thy father and thy mother.*"

⁷ Cf. Matthew 10:37, 8:22.

⁸ Cf. Matthew 10:34 – 40; John 16:2

⁹ cf. Mark 3:35

And I know that Christianity is often marketed as a bastion of marriage and family values. In fact, one might even be inspired to focus on the family as an expression of one's Christian faith. And there is some truth in all of that.

But it may come as something of a shock to realize that from the New Testament's perspective, from the gospel's perspective, one of the primary idolatries that had to be dismantled by the gospel was blind loyalty to one's family.

The ties of family loyalty, just like ties of national loyalty, had to be challenged because they were blinding people to the truth. They were keeping people from the truth of God's love and from the truth that we are to love one another with a love that goes beyond the blinding borders of family, of race, and of nation. Only when the idolatrous ties of family and race and nation are displaced relative to and beneath the claim of faith, can we ever gather as we ought in unity as children in the family of God at this Eucharistic table, bow down and wash one another's feet, and greet one another with a holy kiss of welcome and peace.

Yes, Christianity does honor marriage and family life, but only within a discipline of faith that can distinguish between our debt owed to Caesar and our debt owed to God, and our love owed to neighbor and our love owed to God. When push comes to shove in our fallen world, we must obey God rather than men.¹⁰

In our study this past year in Ephesians I tried to make this truth clear relative to the paradoxical command of submission heard throughout the New Testament. I asked you to think of yourself as a member of an ancient Roman family and let's say you're family are Roman citizens by birth. Place yourself in the position of one day having your paterfamilias,

your "*head of household*," come home and announce for reasons of political ambition, that he wants his family to pay special tribute to the emperor by joining the cult that worships the emperor as a deity.

It's a simple thing. Take a pinch of snuff, throw it into the flame, say "*Caesar is Lord*" and you're all done. It takes only a few moments. It's no big deal. Let's all line up and get started. And remember, your father's promotion depends on it. And that's not all. Your mother's retirement, your sister's marriage, your brother's education... You get the picture?

Yes, you see that the danger of family and national loyalty trumping loyalty to Christ was real, and the cost of being a disciple of Jesus Christ was real. It could cost you everything.

But, then again, it has a pretty nice up side too! All things considered, the benefits greatly outweigh the costs. Jesus knew that, and he wanted his mother Mary to know that too. Paul knew that. He said he counted what he lost as so much rubbish in order to gain Christ.¹¹

We're coming to a year's end this week, it's a time when people size things up and make New Year's resolutions. Let us all resolve to seek first the Kingdom of God as we enter 2019. Let us all resolve to put first things first.

Let us all accept the disciplines and limits that such a love requires and rejoice in our being sons and daughters of God's commandments, knowing that its blessings far outweigh its costs.

AMEN!

¹⁰ Cf. Acts 5:29

¹¹ Cf. Philippians 3:8f.