

**Catholic Church of the Beatitudes  
Santa Barbara, CA**

Feast of the Holy Family – December 29, 2012

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Reflections on **1 Samuel 1:20-22,24-28; 1 John 3:1-2,21-24; Luke 2:41-52**

Whenever I hear the gospel reading for today, that tells about the experience of the Holy Family at Passover the year that Jesus was 12 years old – I have to chuckle. If there were ever any doubt that Jesus was fully human – this settles that argument for me.

In the reading, Mary and Joseph had completed their religious obligations and were on their way back home to Nazareth. Jesus wasn't with them, but they assumed that he was in the caravan with his buddies or other family members. When they realized he wasn't, they panicked, and ran back to Jerusalem to find him. After looking for *three days* (!), they found him in the temple, talking to the teachers and expounding on the Holy Scriptures.

Have you ever had the experience of being with a twelve-year old boy who's expounding on something that he's really interested in? It's sort of breathtaking. The words come pouring out of the boy, along with his inflated sense of himself. It's such a human stage of development – and Jesus was right there at age twelve.

No doubt he was extremely bright, and well-spoken, and curious, and interested in the priests and their teachings. But what he *wasn't* so interested in was the effect of his actions on his parents. What he needed was to spend more time in the circle of his family – the Holy Family – learning some life lessons in sharing *and* caring. So, very kindly but firmly, his parents took him away from the temple and back to Nazareth. And when he emerged 18 years later, Jesus was exquisitely tuned into the needs and

concerns of other people and ready for the astounding work of his ministry. The Holy Family did its work well.

But then there is the first reading today – from the book of Samuel. When I first read this, I thought – what am I going to say about this? A woman prays for years for a child. Then she gives birth, and when the child Samuel is weaned – probably at one year or so – she takes him to the temple at Shiloh and *leaves him there!* What kind of a mother would do that?

But the more I thought about it, the more I came to see that this story illustrates another essential task of the family. It is true that the family is the place where most of us are nurtured and taught lessons for our lives, as the gospel points out. *And* – the family is also the place that lets us go – over and over again. Here's what I mean.

The first letting go is when the mother weans the child – after which the child can get food from people other than the mother. The mother lets go the close bond she has with the child and lets others into relationship with the child. This involves risk, and the hope that others will treat the child well.

The second letting go is when the child goes to school. The family intends that the child will be nurtured and educated and inspired there. But there is uncertainty at school as well. Teachers may not meet the child's needs. Bullies may torment the child.

And while these were extreme and rare events – for *some* children of Newtown and Columbine and others, school was a place of

death. The saddest letting go of all is when parents bury their young children.

When a child becomes a teenager, more letting go is required. In those years, there is a constant balance between giving the teen the opportunity to grow and the danger that he/she will make harmful choices.

After high school, when children take their leave of the family home, it forces growth in the parents as well as the children. The parents must let go their identity as the ones responsible for their children – and hand that responsibility to the children themselves – ready or not!

For example, we can imagine how intense and difficult it is to let go of a child entering military service and going off to wage war.

And when jobs and life partners and mortgages and all the rest happen, the parents need to let go concerns about their child's abilities to handle them all, in spite of challenges and uncertainties.

When grandchildren come along – more letting go needs to happen, to give the new family space to begin the cycle all over again.

In the course of these experiences with their children, parents have many, many opportunities to let go of parts of themselves: their illusions, their delusions, cherished opinions, even dreams for themselves.

And as time goes on, the child eventually needs to let the parents go in death.

In all those instances of letting go – there are so many opportunities for the child to fail to live up to her/his potential or even for him/her to make disastrous choices. It is quite likely that they will break their

parents' hearts. There are many opportunities for the parents to make mistakes, and to break the child's heart, too. I don't know any families that have not suffered some heartbreak. Do you?

I once heard someone say that it is even necessary for the heart to break – because it's only by being broken open that the heart is able to grow larger to love more and more. As our hearts grow larger, our concerns and care can extend far beyond our own little family. Friends, church communities, civic organizations, even international efforts can become family for us. And those larger families present us with more opportunities for life lessons and for letting go.

So—how does all this relate to our relationship with God?

I believe that God is constantly letting us go – letting us go to learn, to grow, to try, to choose, to fail. That is what free will and freedom are all about. Throughout our whole life, God gently guides and beckons us – drawing us to be our best selves, giving us all the grace we need. God accompanies us all the way - and wants the best for us – just like human parents want the best for their children.

I assume that God's heart breaks when we fail to be our best selves. And just like a human parent, God continues to love us and beckon us back to try over and over again, as long as we live.

Finally, there is a saying that . . . *family* is where – when all else fails – they have to take you in. God is that way. God will *always* take you in.