

## **It Takes a Faith Community to Raise a Child to Love God**

Luke 2:41-52 by Patty Friesen (Jan.13/19)

Welcome to Part III in this trilogy from Luke 2:41-51 about the 12 year old Jesus. What a rich passage it is providing with reflection on Mary's pondering and prayerful posture of openness and reflection. Mary and Joseph's faith formation of Jesus through religious habits and the importance of extended family, friends and the faith community in the spiritual formation of a child. Last Sunday we did the Chiasm Bible Study which works in from the perimeter verses to the heart of the passage in Verse 46: "After three days of searching, Mary and Joseph found Jesus in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions." The 12 year old Jesus is the centre of this passage, sitting in the heart of Jewish faith discussing it, listening and asking questions and ultimately reworking faith throughout his life.

It was delightful to hear that the youth Sunday school class had sermon response about 12 year old Jesus' parents not understanding him. The youth resonated with Jesus on that point. In Mosaic Sunday School class we also discussed the sermon and the challenges for young families to incorporate religious rituals at home. Young parents said that's why they need the church community - to help them with faith formation of their children in Sunday School, intergenerational activities, camp and Vacation Bible School which leads deliciously into today's sermon.

While Jesus' spiritual formation began with Mary and Joseph and their friends and extended family, it expands to the larger religious community meeting for worship and discussion in the Temple. What does it take to pass on our hope, trust, and love of God to our children? What does it take for all of us to listen and ask questions in

church, to capture children's imaginations and souls with the hope and magnificent love of God's work in the world? It takes moms, dads, grandparents, Sunday School teachers, mentors, elders and pastors whose own imaginations have been captured by God's work in the world. It takes being intentional with **story, ritual and relationships** at home and at church. And it takes understanding the power of these elements to inspire and form children into adults who not only desire to live in the way of Jesus but who daily make choices to live that way. (Beckwith, Formational Children's Ministry, p. 15)

Like this Jesus story we have today about Jesus in the temple, **sitting** among the teachers, **listening** to them and **asking** them questions. That is how Jesus learns about God and in turn teaches about God. He **sits** among people right where they are at and he does this throughout his ministry - sitting at the well with the Samaritan woman, sitting in the boat with the disciples, sitting at the table for Passover and the Last Supper. Jesus gets in there with people in the village square or at the coffee shop and in the fishing boat or on the combine and in homes. Today is the only time we actually see Jesus teaching in the temple. He spends most of his time on the road or on the lake. He **listens** first to people's lives and then **asks** them questions, to reflect and ponder on God's ways: Whose image is on this coin? Who is without sin? Consider the lilies or canola of the field. They neither toil nor spin, yet Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. Therefore trust God with your life like the birds and the canola blossoms.

Jesus engages in a three stage faith formation beginning with 1. observing what is going on right around a person; beginning with life experience and then 2. reflection

on God's presence in that and then 3. back to applying God's love and mercy to how we live from here on out. Life, Faith, Life. Look at your Life, See What God Has Done, then back to life - how does this make a difference or make you want to live differently? Get up and walk, go and sin no more or go and forgive.

Alongside telling the amazing stories of Jesus in the faith community, then we tell the stories of people in the early church and throughout church history who were changed by their encounter with Jesus. Tomie dePaolo has written lovely children's books about St. Francis of Assisi and other early Christians. There are a few children's books about Anabaptist Reformers in Europe. Our Amish cousins read *The Martyr's Mirror*, the stories of Anabaptist martyred heroes to their children but that may be a little intense for children's literature. We need to tell the ecumenical stories of heroes of faith like Lutheran activist Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and the martyred Archbishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador and the political transformer Archbishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa. *All Saints* by Robert Ellsberg provides an international Christian hero for everyday of the year to learn about and emulate.

The stories of God's people are powerful enough to influence generations how to think and behave in brave and kind ways. They are much more real and true and exciting as super heroes than Marvel Superheroes. The most powerful stories are our own - learning to ponder our life's ups and downs and twists and bends with God walking beside us as friend and saviour. Spiritual formation is a lifelong process. We should always be learning something new about God. When we ourselves have learned to observe God's presence in our lives and articulate how that made a

difference, then we are ready to share those observations with our children. (Thomas Groome, Will There Be Faith?)

Children know when we're making stuff up and when we are being authentic about our faith and struggles. The stories of how we helped someone, how we made a tough decision, how we navigated a conflict, and how we celebrated a victory weave us together as a community. For example, the weekly storytelling for OMC 90 wove us together as a community these past six months. Children feel a part of the community when they know our personal stories and are able to voice their own experiences of God at home and in Sunday School, when they are active participants not passive recipients in faith.

We engage and shape children and adults through story and through **ritual**. Ritual is something we do over and over again as a way to remember and reinforce the values the ritual represents. We take communion every other month to remind us of Christ's love for us and that's why I've come to believe that children's participation in this ritual of Jesus' love has the power to shape them in that love as it does we adults. Children are shaped by imitating adults in church: helping take offering like on Loose Change Sunday, praying, singing, reading scripture, taking communion, lighting candles, eating potluck together, tying comforters and packing MCC Buckets. They are literally imitating our practices of faith even if they don't understand everything. There is no passing on of values without ritual. (p. 69). Maybe we need even more rituals in worship and Sunday School, that get us out of our pews and using our bodies and engaging our senses and thoughts.

Finally, children and adults are shaped by **relationships**, at home and in the faith community. As someone who doesn't have children myself, I'm blessed by families who bring their children to church so I get to see them and sing with them and play with them in the gym. And for those of us who have family living far away, we need church family close by. One Sunday morning before church, a tot came up to me in the church lobby and said, "I threw up this morning." "I'm sorry to hear that," I said pastorally and off she skipped. These little people make my job fun. I remember the older people in my small church growing up who made me feel special by paying attention to me and asking me about my life and affirming me when I tried new things in church. The acceptance and interest of older people in my church growing up is why I'm in church now.

We need generations interacting together in church. We have child dedication in church because we believe children do not only belong to God and their parents but to a larger community of faith who will help raise, love and guide them. We have potlucks that have mixers with kids mixed in with adult and discussing topics at table, like next week we will sit in our birthday month groups and elders please talk to the children about the advantages of being born in that month. We had children and youth participating predominantly in OMC 90 because our celebration was about our future as much as it was about our past. We have intergenerational games night twice a year and for the first time in a decade, we will have a church retreat at Shekinah Retreat Centre on March 24 for intergenerational worship and play together. I dare some older person to go down the Flying Fox zip-line at church retreat. The church kids will never forget it and will talk about it for generations.

Children and adults form close connections with God their Creator in family time in nature, and at summer camp. I want to try having more and more church outside with orchard blessings, skating parties, Weiner roasts, hikes. Shared experiences outdoors give us something to converse about and is the start of a deeper relationship between generations. Spiritual formation happens in a intergenerational way when young, old and middle-agers find meaningful relationships with each other for the purpose of modelling the life of faith and developing a sense of belonging for all members of the faith community. As a faith community, we may not be the perfect shapers of faith - we've got hang-ups and conflicts and struggle to fill Sunday School teaching slots. We can't do it all on our own, we need families to be shaping faith at home but as a faith community, we promise to come alongside and struggle with the ways to put our faith into action and try to be the most compassionate community we can be.

Let us pray: We love our young. May God bless our relating, speaking and listening, so that our words, thoughts and actions bless the church's children. May we and those we love, be sheltered and nourished by the deep awareness that we are all part of God's big story; that we are loved, treasured and gifted by God our Creator, Jesus our Friend and the Holy Spirit our Guide and Comforter. Amen. (Elsie Rempel, The Spirituality of Grandparenting)