



FAMILY CRISIS

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I went and played laser tag for the first time a few weeks ago with my two boys. It was a lot of fun. But when I first got in there, I didn't do so well. It was dark and the room is set up like a maze. I kept going down dead ends and people were shooting at me. I was sweating and huffing and puffing as I tried to figure out what I was doing, and the whole time I had Addison and Isaac following right at my heels hoping I wouldn't lead them to their doom.

We're talking about family life for the next few weeks, and as I was preparing for this morning's message, I felt like I was back in that laser tag maze. There are so many directions you can go with a topic like this. I kept going down these rabbit trails that would turn out to be a dead end. And the more I studied, the more stressful it seemed to get.

I'm better now. But I have to say that talking about families is one of the toughest topics I have tried to tackle. And I think I've learned why. For starters, it's tough because it's such a broad topic. When you say you're going to talk about family, it's like trying to write a school paper about the solar system. You have to narrow it down to something specific or it doesn't have any meaning.

Secondly, it is tough because it is so important. Family affects all of us. Whether we are the product of a great family or a totally dysfunctional one, we spend a lifetime grappling with what we've inherited from our family tree. Then as we get out of the house and maybe start our own family, things shift as we are introduced to the dynamics of relationships with a spouse, maybe children or aging parents.

Often those relationships are made or broken in times of crisis. And as I look around, I see more and more families in crisis mode. Sometimes it's a health crisis, like my friend facing his second bout of leukemia. Tragedy like that can precipitate a financial crisis, which can in turn lead to a marital crisis. I just learned of another couple this week who are separating after seven years of marriage.

It can be the crisis of a teenager who fights you on everything. Or maybe it's a smaller emotional crisis when your toddler refuses to eat their dinner after they've missed a nap and whined all day long. Big or small, the strains of life and the realities of living under one roof can beat down a good family pretty quickly.

I would say that we are living in particularly difficult times to be a family, but I don't know that it's ever been easy. You only have to read as far in the Bible as Adam and Eve and their kids to see that it started out rough from the beginning. You have deception, blaming, jealousy, anger and murder all within the first few chapters of Genesis. And it doesn't improve much through the whole Bible. The stories record failure after failure with just glimmers of hope along the way. I read a book this week that said, "The Bible is not a retouched photo, and some of its saddest verses are family verses. The stories parallel our own lives and proclaim the truth: There is no pain like family pain."

Many of you are feeling that kind of pain firsthand. If you're not at the moment, you undoubtedly will at some point, because the combination of relationships and life on a timeline means that countless crises are in store for families. They are inevitable.

Not a terribly cheery note. But there is hope. And as I wrestled with what to say this morning, I felt like the Lord took me to a story from Jesus' own family life where they experienced a mini-crisis. And although I don't think Luke originally intended the story to be a commentary on families, there are a number of truths we can draw from the event that have bearing on our lives today.

Luke is the only gospel writer to include a story from Jesus' childhood years. Most scholars believe that when Luke was researching his book, he either interviewed Mary or had access to her recollections, because on several occasions he references her thoughts or views.

My mother-in-law and my mother were together this week, and my mother-in-law was pumping my mother for good stories of my complete dorkiness as a child. I can picture Luke sitting down with Mary saying, "Okay. Give me the scoop. What was Jesus like as a kid? What was something wild he did?"

And Mary, being the mom, could have said, "Oh he was perfect. Always so sweet and kind. Not like my other children. He was a dream."

"Really? You never had any conflicts? No trouble with him at all?"

"Never." Then she stops and thinks for a moment. "Well, there was this one time..." And then she proceeds to share this story.

Luke 2:41-52

Every year Jesus' parents traveled to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up as they always did for the Feast. When it was over and they left for home, the child Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents didn't know it. Thinking he was somewhere in the company of pilgrims, they journeyed for a whole day and then began looking for him among relatives and neighbors. When they didn't find him, they went back to Jerusalem looking for him.

The next day they found him in the Temple seated among the teachers, listening to them and asking questions. The teachers were all quite taken with him, impressed with the sharpness of his answers. But his parents were not impressed; they were upset and hurt.

His mother said, "Young man, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been half out of our minds looking for you."

He said, "Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know that I had to be here, dealing with the things of my Father?" But they had no idea what he was talking about.

So he went back to Nazareth with them, and lived obediently with them. His mother held these things dearly, deep within herself. And Jesus matured, growing up in both body and spirit, blessed by both God and people.

You can see why this incident would have stuck in Mary's mind. It was a few days of high drama that had a happy ending even though it put them through an emotional ringer. They came out of it forever different than they went into it. That's the nature of a crisis: It has a profound ability to shape you.

What exactly took place? Let's go back through the sequence of events and see how we can break it down to better understand how their situation has anything to do with us in our world.

The underlying issue that triggered the crisis was simple: Jesus was missing. Imagine taking your 12 year old to a Mariners playoff game with a group from church. He's been hanging out during the game with his friends, and as you pile into one of the church vans to head home, you assume he's in the other one. As you start leaving the parking garage, you decide to call the driver of the other van to check on him. And the driver says, "Isn't he with you? He's not with us." You suddenly realize that your son is somewhere in a sea of 30,000 strangers, and you have no idea where.

Elizabeth Stone once said, "Making the decision to have a child is momentous. It is to decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body." I'm sure that's how Mary felt in that awful moment of realization that she didn't know where her firstborn was.

Even worse was the fact that they had traveled a full day's journey before noticing he was gone. That meant that by the time they could even start to look for him in Jerusalem, it would be another full day of helpless worry as they returned to the city to find him. That was time to ponder the fact that hundreds of thousands of people converged on Jerusalem during Passover. It was going to be like looking for a needle in a haystack. What if he was kidnapped? What if he wasn't just lost but had been attacked or hurt? You know Mary was being racked with what Karin calls "Mommy Guilt" – thinking how she had failed when she had been told how special he was before his birth. This wasn't just any ordinary child and here she had let this happen.

All of this was just the emotional reaction to the reality that Jesus wasn't with the family.

I think many families today are on the first day of the journey with Mary and Joseph. They don't know it yet, but Jesus is missing. They don't even necessarily feel his absence – their life is going along just great. But a family that's traveling along through life without Jesus is a family in crisis, whether they know it or not.

In fact, I would go so far as to say that just like missing Jesus was the central crisis for Mary and Joseph in this story, **missing Jesus is the central crisis for families today as well**. Does that sound overly dramatic? How can I say it's a crisis if a family is functioning just fine without Christ?

I think it poses an identity crisis for a family. It's hard to know who you really are when a central person is missing from the group. If you've ever called our house on a weeknight, you know how loud it gets. With three kids running around in the background, people who call always think we must have extra kids over because of the volume.

The dynamics are completely different when one of them is gone to a birthday party. Addison, who's the middle child, has rarely been out of the mix when everybody else is home, but Friday night he went to a baseball game and was out pretty late. All our relationships shifted. Bedtime routines were different. Interactions with the other kids changed. We weren't the same family without Addison there.

Functioning without Jesus is possible, but you're not the same family as when he's right in the middle of it. There's an empty chair at the dinner table where he's supposed to sit, because he belongs there. Relationships are shifted. Interactions are different without him.

After Addison was born, we really thought for a long time that we were through having kids and our family was complete. Two boys seemed like plenty to keep us busy. But then Annika came along, and I don't know how many times Karin and I have looked at each other and said, "Can you imagine our family without her?" It would have been such a loss and such a change to who we are.

When we say our family is complete without Jesus, we're cutting ourselves off from part of who we're supposed to be. He's an integral piece of what it means to be family. What we choose to do and why isn't the same without him.

To truly make Jesus part of your family life means making him central to your individual life. When Mary discovered that Jesus was missing, imagine if Joseph had said, "He's your son. You go ahead and look for him. I'll save our place in line here." Instead he was fully engaged in the pursuit and just as concerned as Mary.

If you're serious about restoring Jesus to his place in your family, it means getting serious about the search. You can't leave the job to the rest of the family – it's a personal responsibility.

Missing Jesus was the central issue, but there were other factors that contributed to the crisis this family was going through. I'm sure that after they got home, Mary and Joseph must have reviewed their own actions to see how they could prevent something similar from happening the next year. That's what we all do. Hindsight is always 20/20. But as difficult as the experience was at the time, from our vantage point today we can look at their situation and draw some lessons for ourselves.

The first would be this:

Know who's where.

Look again at what happened when they headed home:

When it was over and they left for home, the child Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents didn't know it. Thinking he was somewhere in the company of pilgrims, they journeyed for a whole day and then began looking for him among relatives and neighbors.

Without pointing blame, it is clear that there was a lack of communication within the family on that day. Mary and Joseph thought Jesus knew they were leaving. They thought he was traveling with them. They thought he was with another part of the group.

All those assumptions were wrong. And they realized they hadn't checked in with him, they hadn't clarified expectations or made a plan. And they had no idea where he would be.

It's easy to lose track of each other in the middle of life's activities. We're busy with our own stuff, and we often just assume that everybody in the family is doing okay. Do we really know where everybody's at – emotionally, mentally or spiritually?

Like Mary and Joseph, sometimes we don't know what we don't know. Then when we find out, it becomes a crisis. It's like the woman I know who was completely floored when she discovered that her husband had been cheating on her for years. There was a disconnect somewhere early on in their relationship that they both just ignored, so when the issues finally came to light, it was too late.

Knowing who's where is critical to the health of a family. Karin's parents have a practical way of doing that with each other. Through all the years of their marriage, on a regular basis they will complete these two sentences: "The thing I appreciate about you the most right now is..." and "The thing I need most from you right now is..." It's a simple exercise, but it has been a great tool for them to stay connected emotionally.

Do you know who's where in your family? Are you operating under the illusion that everybody's okay? Maybe they are, and that's great. Now's the time to open up the communication, to keep the dialogue going.

Mary and Joseph came to realize they really didn't know where Jesus was, and they were scared, because they had no idea where to look. But they were diligent, kept asking questions and kept searching until they found him.

It's not always easy to answer the question of who's where. The further out of touch we are, the more work it will be.

On a recent episode of Super Nanny, the nanny Jo Frost wanted the father in the Burnett family to sit down with their 8 year old son Zachary to help him with his homework. As he sat with his son, Zachary became more and more withdrawn. Finally the nanny stepped in and asked him what was wrong. "You yell at me," Zachary told his dad.

His dad was mystified. "What are you talking about? I'm not yelling."

Then all of a sudden in a burst of emotion, Zachary blurted out, "You yelled at me in first grade." He had been carrying a hurt around for a full year, and it wasn't until his dad had that check in with him that he was able to get that off his chest and move on.

It may feel awkward. I've had check-in conversations with people where I feel like I'm completely stumbling over myself and not making any progress. But I've come to believe that **staying connected is worth looking stupid**. And generally speaking, people in your family will appreciate the intent, even when you're not perfect.

When Mary and Joseph's parents finally tracked Jesus down, they were legitimately surprised by what they saw.

The next day they found him in the Temple seated among the teachers, listening to them and asking questions. The teachers were all quite taken with him, impressed with the sharpness of his answers. But his parents were not impressed; they were upset and hurt.

His mother said, "Young man, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been half out of our minds looking for you."

He said, "Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know that I had to be here, dealing with the things of my Father?" But they had no idea what he was talking about.

Again, if Mary and Joseph were speaking to us today, I think they would tell us that the lesson they learned at this point is that you need to

Know what's what.

It never occurred to them that he would be hanging out in the Temple. Jesus seems genuinely surprised that they didn't look for him there first.

Back before he was born, both Mary and Joseph had been visited by angels who told them Jesus would be special. They both had been there in the stable when the shepherds came and told their story. They both had been there at the temple when he was a baby and people came up and shared a prophecy about him.

But that had been years ago. Somewhere along the line, they seemed to have lost sight of who this child of theirs was and why he was in their care. Mary and Joseph had younger children as well, and I'm sure there were many times when Jesus was treated like all the rest.

In this case, they were searching for him the same way they would for any of their other kids, not taking into account Jesus' unique purpose in the world and his unique relationship with God the Father. There was a bigger picture that they had forgotten to factor in. They had lost sight of what was what.

When God puts us in families together, he has more in mind than just our well being as a little group. He has a larger purpose for us, individually and collectively.

I had a professor who along with his wife had written out a life purpose statement, and every year the two of them would sit down to reassess how they were doing in fulfilling that purpose.

What it comes down to is being intentional instead of haphazard. Are our actions determined by the circumstances we find ourselves in, or by a larger purpose we've committed ourselves to pursuing?

One of the most important gifts we can give each person in our family is to help them identify and live out what God has called them to do. Who should be better qualified to see the way God has gifted and wired you than the people closest to you?

Author Jodie Berndt talks about her daughter Annesley, who has always been extremely organized. When she was three, she would put puzzles together from left to right, trying all the pieces until they fit. When she learned to write, she became a list maker and loved to keep all her things organized.

Her mom Jodie just thought of it as a funny quirk, but then finally realized that God had given her the gift of organization. So the next time her daughter announced her organized evening plans, Jodie told her "Annesley, I really appreciate how organized you are. God has given you a special gift. Won't it be exciting to see how he uses your talents to bless other people?"

Jodie writes, "The look on Annesley's face sent a stab through my heart. She was positively beaming. Seeing her reaction to my words, I realized that I had rarely – if ever

– commented on her talent for organization, and I had never told her how grateful I was that God had gifted her in that way. How could I have been so negligent? I don't know. But there is one thing I am sure of: Never again will I pass up the chance to point out my kids' gifts and encourage them to use them for God's kingdom."

When we don't see what God is doing in somebody's life is when we run the risk of running into a crisis. We'll be caught up in misunderstandings and hurt feelings because we weren't on board with what was happening and we had a different agenda for them.

Know what's what with your family.

Things got a little tense there as Mary voiced her frustration and Jesus responded.

His mother said, "Young man, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been half out of our minds looking for you."

He said, "Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know that I had to be here, dealing with the things of my Father?" But they had no idea what he was talking about.

Normally, I would expect things to escalate. That would normally be when the adolescent would scream, "Nobody understands me!" and storm out of the room. They are at an impasse and not on the same page at all.

But as quickly as it begins, Jesus ends it.

So he went back to Nazareth with them, and lived obediently with them. His mother held these things dearly, deep within herself. And Jesus matured, growing up in both body and spirit, blessed by both God and people.

I think the conclusion Mary and Joseph would have reached from this would be

Know when's enough.

There's nothing I hate worse than being misunderstood. I once knew a guy who did not like me and who interpreted everything I said through this negative view he had of me. We would get in these email conversations and he would take things I wrote and completely turn them around to mean something I never intended. I would labor forever over those emails, writing volumes to try to make myself clear. But every time it seemed to be taken the wrong way.

Sometimes, being understood isn't the important thing. Jesus realized that rather than fight it out with his parents, the more important job was to submit to their authority in his life. Pushing to prove he was right would have been at the expense of the relationship.

Mary let it go as well. She was able to go back home and keep the memory without constantly bringing it up or trying to solve it after the fact. She turned it into a learning experience for herself and tucked it away in the back of her mind. By letting go of her

own feelings of fear over the incident and not staying there mentally, Luke says she was actually able to treasure the experience as one of those times that gave her a peek inside the mind of Jesus like no other.

To diffuse a family crisis, we need to learn when's enough, when it's time to let an argument die, when it's time to move on rather than hash over old hurts. Rather than focus on how it hurt us, we can instead ask, "What did I learn about this person? What did I learn about myself?"

Even though his parents didn't understand him and never fully came around to his point of view, Jesus still was able to thrive in their home. Luke says he matured and was blessed by God and people. His choice to be obedient and let go of the need to be understood ended up having an extremely positive and healthy outcome.

Let me be really clear here: I'm not suggesting that you excuse real hurts or brush things off as if they don't matter. More harm comes from sweeping pain under the rug than from confronting it. But knowing when's enough means knowing when a crisis is more about pride and proving your point than it is about setting things right. And in those times, stepping down is the better choice.

As we think about our own families in crisis, I'd like to leave you with a couple questions:

1. Is Jesus missing? Can I say that he's right here in the middle of our family? Am I even aware of his absence? You can start the journey back to find him this morning, and restore him to his proper place in your own heart as well as your family's. He's just waiting for your invitation.
2. Do I know who's where in my family? Checking in regularly is key to staying on the same page. This week, try finishing those statements with each person: "What I appreciate most about you right now is..." and "What I need most from you right now is..."
3. Do I know what's what? Do I have a sense of purpose in my own life, as well as purpose for my family? How am I doing at identifying and supporting what God is doing in their lives?
4. Do I know when's enough? Am I currently in an argument where I need to step down, give up my need to be understood and focus on the relationship?