

Anne Lamott is a somewhat irreverent Christian writer. When her son Sam was 13, and frustrating the heck out of her as is a teenager's wont, she asked her Jesuit priest friend, Fr. Tom, "What was done with 13-year olds in the time of Jesus?" Fr. Tom replied: "In biblical times, they used to stone a few 13-year-olds with some regularity, which helped keep the others quiet and at home. The mothers were usually in the first row of stone throwers, and had to be restrained." This then led Lamott to reflect further: "What did Mary do when Jesus was thirteen?" "Here's what I think," she writes, "She occasionally started gathering rocks. If we take the incarnation seriously, then even good old Jesus was 13 once, a human 13-year-old. It must have been awful sometimes. Do you know anyone for whom adolescence was consistently okay? But in his case, we don't know for sure. We see him earlier, in the Bible, at 12, when he's speaking to the elders in the Temple. He's great with the elders, just as my son Sam is always fabulous – with other grown-ups. They can't believe he's such an easygoing kid, with such good manners. In the Temple, Jesus says things so profound that the elders are amazed. 'Who's this kid's teacher?' they wonder. They don't know that Jesus' teacher was the Holy Spirit. But at the same time he's blowing the elders away, how is Jesus treating his parents? I'll tell you: He's making them crazy. He's ditched them. They can't find him for 3 days. Some of you know what it's like to not find your kid for 3 hours. You die. Mary and Joseph have looked everywhere, in the market, at the video arcade. Finally they find him, in the last place they thought to look – the Temple. And immediately, he mouths off: Oh, sorry, sorry, I was busy doing all this other stuff, my father's work. Like, Joseph, you're not my real father – you're not the boss of me. I don't even have to listen to you. And what is Mary doing this whole time? Mary's got a rock in her hand." (PLAN B, FURTHER THOUGHTS ON FAITH, p 98-99). Yes, it's a bit irreverent. But it reminds us that Jesus was fully human, like us in all things but sin. But that doesn't mean that from time to time He must have driven Joseph and Mary nuts – and today's gospel is a prime candidate for such an occasion.

Which leads us right into our own wacky worlds of family. First, a little history and theology might be helpful. Pope John Paul II made it clear on numerous occasions that the family – and we need to add 'in its various forms' – is the foundational unit of the Church. The parish is not the Church's bottom line, the family is. A parish is made up of households, most of which are families of various shapes and sizes. If faith is not alive and thriving in those families – and we're not talking about rampant superficial piety here – then faith grows weaker at the parish level. It's as simple as that. The remarks of Pope John Paul II during his September 1987 visit to the United States are relevant: "the family itself is the first and most appropriate place for teaching the truths of the faith, the practice of Christian virtues and the essential values of human life.....every parish is a *family of families*. The vitality of a parish greatly depends on the spiritual vigor, commitment and involvement of its families. The family in fact is the basic unit of society and of the Church. It is 'the domestic Church.' Families are those living cells which come together to form the very substance of parish life." John Paul did not dream this up one day on a walk around the Vatican Gardens. This insight goes back as far as Christianity's Jewish roots. When the first Christians gathered for worship, after they were ejected from the synagogues, they met in one another's homes. Even today, in the Jewish tradition, it is the home, around the family table, where the most significant religious rituals and events are celebrated. Jewish author Arlene Rossen Cardozo writes, "For centuries the family has been the means through which traditional Jewish celebrations have survived and flourished."

In the late 4th century, in his commentaries on Genesis and the Letter to the Ephesians, St. John Chrysostom called the family *ekklesia*, the New Testament Greek word used for 'church.' A few times he used the diminutive form *ekklesiola* ('little church'), but most often he simply called the family 'church.' It's why in the baptismal rite parents of children are asked "Do you promise to bring your children up in the PRACTICE of

the faith?" The primary catechists of any child are their parents and other family members, the 'little church.' (adapted from Mitch Finley, STRATEGIES FOR LIVING CATHOLIC FOR MEN ONLY, p. 61-63)

Second, some more practical application. There is a phrase that has been used in the Catholic tradition: *Families and communities are schools of charity*. We can't have a naïve understanding of this. We initially say 'it makes sense' – because living within a family or some other community, it gives us a lot of chances to practice patience, forgiveness, and understanding – as we deal with other people's faults. But a much deeper thinking suggests that it is not, first of all, that WE grow in love and maturity by putting up patiently with OTHER people's faults, but that real relationship, actual interaction within family and community, deflates our fantasies, makes us see reality, punctures our self-centeredness, and against our very protest, denial, and all the rationalization that we can muster, shows us how selfish and immature WE often are.

We cannot live very long within any community – marriage, family, parish, or genuine friendship – without becoming aware of our faults and narrowness. We either begin to grow up – or we leave. Sadly, today the temptation is mostly to leave. The misguided theory is that we grow by going away, especially away from the family and community within which, by circumstance, we find ourselves. The idea is that we will be happy – and available for real family and friendship – if we are free spirits, soaring, unattached, unencumbered, and everyone agrees with me.

No. Family and community are never boring – they're terrifying! They're too full of searing revelations – they are a place where we have no place to hide. In family life, our selfishness and immaturities are reflected back to us through eyes that are steady and unblinking. Staying within them is often the hell that leads to heaven. (adapted from Rolheiser, OUR ONE GREAT ACT OF FIDELITY, p. 114-116)

Finally, one further twist to help in a many-layered understanding of family, for we are all one human family throughout the world -- under the Fatherhood of God. C. J. Gall writes: "One day, you look around, and you're in the sandbox all by yourself. Your children leave long before they leave." All the friendly advice and parenting books cannot prepare you for this, and if you have not yet experienced it, you will still believe in your heart that you are too close to your son or daughter for it to happen to you. You will silently nod to your friends while considering yourself exempt.

The date of this event is not on the calendar like other milestones: prom, college, turning 21. But the day will come, and that is a heck of a thing....Only when it happens will you know.

Those of us who've bonded with our children the most perhaps cling hardest to the hope that they will return to us in a new way, even when the evidence is all around that the nicest of parents get left behind too. Here is a person you spoke to dozens of times a day, a person you watched unfold, a person you adored, and now she will yank up her roots and drag her rose somewhere else to be admired, cloaking it from you when you try to see it, saving it for her new love.....You do not know if she will ever return. The more confidence and self-reliance you have instilled in her, the more independent and successful she will become – and the more likely she will be not to need you anymore.

....I can think of God only in the way that I think of a parent. Does God watch me sleep even when I'm an adult and want to touch my feet or kiss my forehead? Does God cry in the shower so we won't see him weep when we are dismissive of his favors or forget his birthday? Does God know the day we will turn and walk away? Is his pain offset by an omnipotent awareness that we will come back, or is it haunted by the knowledge that we never will?" ("The Hour and the Day" in THE SUN, August 2013).

You know, for better or worse – WE are family. You and me. All of you and me. All ‘y’all and me! For some mysterious reason God put all of us here at this moment in time. So let’s do our best to do it right – or as right as we can get it, and try to be forgiving for the many times we fail. Despite our bumps and bruises, God is truly in our midst. As this whole Christmas season has tried to remind us -- He is Emmanuel – God-with us – even in our parish! Amen.

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