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Mind Your Own Business

Luke 2:41-52

Rev. Dr. Kory Wilcoxson

I thought I had put it right there. I swear it was there just a second ago, but I looked away for a brief moment and it was gone. I'm pretty good about not losing track of things, so you can understand my frustration. This is something valuable, something I need everyday, so it's not something I would typically lose. Am I talking about my keys? My wallet? My phone? No, what I lost was my child.

Yes, I'll step up and claim that I have been the recipient of the Bad Parent Award. Sydney was two at the time. The box I was lifting into the back of my car was heavy, but I only looked away for a second. I set her down and told her not to move, that the parking lot was full and there were cars all around and it was dark. I quickly lifted the box in the car, but when I looked down, she was gone. Just that fast, my child was no longer by my side, no longer safe from the shoppers speeding to get the open parking spaces. I looked around frantically, waiting to hear screeching tires. And then I saw her, waddling toward the store she knew Mommy was in. She had crossed one row in the parking lot and was headed for another. I ran to her and swooped her up in my arms, feeling a mixture of joy and anger and guilt and relief. I said to her, "I told you to stay by our side, I told you not to stray. Don't you know what could have happened to you?" I used to make fun of parents who put their kids on leashes. After that day, I put two leashes on Sydney, just in case. She was only gone five seconds, and yet for me, it felt like two lifetimes.

So, I can only imagine how Mary and Joseph felt in this story when they realized Jesus was no longer by their side. They were coming back from a significant family vacation, a five-day journey to Jerusalem for the festival of Passover. This year's trip was made even more significant by the fact that Jesus was 12 years old, meaning it was his first year to be considered an adult under Jewish law. This was his first real Passover, a gateway for him into adulthood, much like our first communion after baptism. So, he does what any 12-year-old boy would do in the big city as a newly christened adult: he ditches his parents and goes exploring. I'm sure Mary and Joseph were attentive parents most of the time, but look away for a second, and before they know it, they've lost Jesus.

Don't be too quick to blame them. At first, they may sound like they should have Jesus on a leash, but before you call Savior Protective Services, consider this: in those days, it was customary for the women and men to travel separately as they journeyed. The group of women would leave earlier in the day, on one end of a long caravan, and the men would bring up the other end of the caravan, meeting the women later in the evening at the stopping point. So, Mary and Joseph may not have seen each other during the first day of their journey home. Chances are Mary thought Jesus was with Joseph, and Joseph thought Jesus was with Mary, and when they meet, it turns into an "I Love Lucy" episode: "Hey, Mary. Where's Jesus?" "Isn't he with you?" "I thought he was with YOU!" "Are you telling me we've lost the Son of God?"

Thankfully, their story has a happy ending. A return to Jerusalem and a desperate three-day search – can you imagine how they felt during those three days? – ends in the temple, where Jesus sat amongst the priests and scribes, listening and asking questions, learning from his elders. Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph were "astonished," which

comes from the Middle English root meaning “to strike with lightning.” They were thunderstruck at what they found. This was their son? Remembering her maternal duties, Mary turns on her Mama Bear voice. You can almost picture her grabbing Jesus’ ear as she says, “Why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” I’m guessing the original Hebrew contains a couple cuss words that were edited out. We told you to stay by our side, we told you not to stray. Don’t you know what could have happened to you?

Jesus’ response to Mary is one of the most significant passages in the New Testament. Not only is it the first time he speaks in Luke’s gospel, but it is his first acknowledgement of who he is, and who he is to be. “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” “My father’s house” is a loose translation of the original Hebrew. Scholars also have translated it to mean “in his realm, by his side, about his business,” as in, “Did you not know that I must be about my Father’s business?” Notice the contrast between Mary’s use of father, small F, meaning Joseph, and Jesus’ use of Father, capital F, meaning God. With this statement, we begin to get a sense of who this Jesus really is and what his business is all about.

Do you ever think about what your business is here on earth, why God has created you and breathed life into you and blessed you with a purpose? As we start this new year, I want to invite you to ponder what that means. We have all been given that same gift by God, the opportunity to grow in the knowledge of who we are and who we were created to be, to discover what our business is as believers. Do you know your business? Or, by this time in life, is that answer taken for granted or ignored, a forgotten or passing thought in the midst of more pressing realizations like strange noises in your car’s engine and orthodontists’ bills? You have been promised a purpose by God. Do you know what it is? Or have you lost it?

This past Christmas, I heard this story that’s too good not to be true. A working mother was trying to provide a decent Christmas for her children. Her husband was a truck driver, working long hours and gone for weeks at a time, which meant she was left to raise them virtually by herself. Each year Christmas was a struggle, but this year was especially tough. Money seemed tighter than usual, and the kids’ lists for Santa seemed longer than usual. She tried to decorate the house in the Christmas spirit, but things didn’t seem to come together for her. Their tree looked like a piece of kindling, half the ornaments were broken, several strands of lights didn’t work, her favorite nativity scene given to her by her grandmother was missing a piece. It was like something, or everything, was conspiring against her.

As if this weren’t enough stress for her to deal with, she was worried about her five-year old, Billy. He always marched to a beat slightly different than the rest of the children, but as Christmas approached he seemed more distant than usual. One day, he was walking around the house with a wistful half-grin on his face. His mom asked him, “Billy, are you OK? What are you up to?” “Oh, nothing,” he said with that smile on his face. His mom wanted to follow up, but the two-year-old needed a diaper change, and besides, Billy didn’t seem to be hurting anyone, so she dropped it.

On Christmas morning, she watched the present-opening frenzy with joy and a touch of sadness that she couldn’t do more for her kids. Then she noticed Billy disappearing behind the tree and reappearing with several presents he had obviously wrapped himself, one for his mother, father, and each of his siblings. She was baffled.

Billy wasn't a crafts kind of person, so he wouldn't have made them all presents. And he certainly didn't have money to buy gifts for everyone. So, what was this?

The kids began opening their presents from Billy. His brother Tommy had needed to borrow cleats for Little League this past summer because he lost his. His present was his missing cleats that Billy had found in the back of the closet. Joey gave his sister Britney her favorite doll she had misplaced last month when she became preoccupied with another toy. All the other presents were things they already owned but had lost or misplaced during the course of the year. The family was more excited about receiving these recycled presents than they were their new ones. There's a special kind of joy in finding something you thought you lost.

Then Billy's mother opened her gift. It was the piece missing from her grandmother's nativity set, the baby Jesus, which had gotten buried under a stack of paperwork and junk mail. At that moment, the pathetic tree and meager number of presents were forgotten, replaced instead by her son's gift, a gift she already owned, given to her anew to enjoy and appreciate.

God has already given us the greatest gift imaginable, the gift of life and love, made known definitively to us through his son, Jesus Christ. We were created by God to love and serve God, to work for peace and justice, to do God's business. But somewhere along the line, we may have lost track of that. We didn't do it intentionally, but we let it get away from us just the same. Maybe we set it down for a second, thinking we would pick it up again when we had more time. Maybe we misplaced it when we became preoccupied with other priorities. Maybe we let it get buried under a stack of paperwork and to-do lists. For whatever reason, we've lost our understanding of the magnitude of the gift of God's love, of our own God-createdness, of our call to mind our own business as God's servants and followers of Christ.

So God has patiently searched the nooks and crannies of our lives, looking in the dark, forgotten places and under the stacks of responsibilities, and given us, once again, the present we already own. God wrapped it up in swaddling clothes, placed it in a manger, and said, "Here, this is for you."

Can you imagine how Mary and Joseph felt when they held Jesus for the first time after finding him in the temple? Can you imagine how I felt when I picked up Sydney and held her in my arms? There's a special kind of joy in finding something you thought you lost. That's how God feels about us. We may have been lost, but now we are found, found by the One who never stops searching for us and never stops gracing our lives with divine presents. My prayer is that in 2026, you find Jesus again and, better yet, that you are found by Jesus again, reminded of who you are and who you are called to be. Go, be about your business.