Sunday, May 13, 1973
MORE THAN THE FAMILY IS NEEDED
Luke 2:41-52

In the scripture passage just read we have a picture of a family with a problem. Jesus' parents had taken him to the city of Jerusalem and now on their way home they had supposed him to be with the larger group as they traveled toward Nazareth from Jerusalem. But after the first day's journey, in the evening, Jesus was not to be found. He had stayed behind in Jerusalem without telling his parents. And his parents had not checked to see if he was with the larger group of families when they began their homeward journey. The Bible says simply that they had supposed him to be in the company, and so they went a whole day's journey before they missed him. And they then sought him among their kinsfolk and acquaintances.

Now in reading this passage from the Gospel of Luke, some-one is likely to comment, "his parents were not very good parents. They should've checked on him sooner." And others are likely to say, "Jesus was not being a very responsible young man. He should've told his parents that he wanted to stay behind in Jerusalem a little longer." And then when his parents later found him in the temple having a discussion with the teachers and listening to them, Mary and Joseph were probably not only upset because he had caused them extra trouble and they were worried about him, but also be-cause he had taken some of his questions and problems to someone else besides them.

We talk about lack of communication between young people and adults in our time, yet this story indicates that it's not an entirely new problem. We've heard about a "generation gap" in our time, but this story indicates that this too is not an entirely new gap.

However, what is especially interesting and revealing about this incident from the family life of Jesus is that his parents just assumed that he was in the company of those traveling with them. They assumed that he was among their kinsfolk and acquaintances and thus they didn't worry about him. They assumed that he was in the care of the larger family. In those days it was assumed that the care and raising of children was the responsibility of the larger community as well as of the immediate parents. They realized that more than the family was needed. Jesus knew this too. He stayed behind in Jerusalem to ask questions and to learn from the teachers there. He was seeking a broader exper-ience than just his immediate family could possibly give.

This assumption, that more than the immediate family is L needed, was a part of the Hebrew culture and heritage and still is. ·That's why Jewish people have always been interested in good schools and in other community services. Originally, there was the clan or the tribe or the synagogue--no matter what the name or structure — a larger grouping of families which carried some very important responsibilities for the training of children and the passing on of the tradition.

As Christians, _we recognize that more than the family is needed. We do this for example in our service of infant baptism. The congregation is asked: "Do you as members of this congregation promise that you will uphold these parents in the fulfillment of their vows and provide for all children full opportunities for Christian growth and nurture?"

Here we are acknowledging that more than the family is needed. We are saying that the children being baptized are also our responsibility. The parents of the children have the

primary responsibility, but they cannot do all of what needs to be done for their children all by themselves.

Yet we have often forgotten that more than the family is needed. Thus, in our time when children go wrong and get into trouble some people quickly say that it's all the parent's fault. Or people will say, "The way to solve the problem of crime and delinquency is to strengthen the family in the home."

And of course, family life needs to be strengthened and we parents do have a very important and a primary responsibility for our children. But in our kind of world in particular, no matter how good we are as parents, we cannot do everything that needs to be done all by ourselves. We need more than good fathers and mothers.

If we as parents want to raise our children right, we have to be concerned about the community and society as a whole, good schools, a healthy community, wholesome recreation, strong churches. This is because the family is not the only institution which affects and influences our children. L

Perhaps there was a time when most of the knowledge of the world was selectively filtered through parental values to 3. the children. If you had lived on the frontier on a homestead without television, or radio, a kind of isolated family, then certainly you were the main and only influence on your children. But this is no longer true. Now more than the immediate family is affecting all of us all the time. There-fore if we are really concerned about our children, we will also be concerned about the direction and health of our community and society as a whole.

To put it another way, if we are concerned about society as a whole and about our community, we will have to be con-cerned about other people's children as well as our own. We need to have a sense of responsibility for all of the children of the community.

Now lest you misunderstand what we are saying here, I am not at all de-emphasizing the importance of good family life, or of moral values in the home, or of parents setting a good example, or of good discipline. I am saying that even when all of this is done, it is not enough and it can't be enough in our kind of world, just as it wasn't enough in the time when Jesus lived and long before that.

I guess that part of what makes this so difficult to under-stand is that not too many years ago many of the influences outside of the home used to be taken care of informally and without our being much aware of them.

To begin with, families used to be bigger, not in terms of children only but in terms of more adults, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins. Those relatives who didn't live with you lived nearby. You often went to their homes. They came as often to yours and stayed for dinner. You knew them all, the old folks, the older cousins-. and they knew you. This had its good side and its bad side.

On the good side, some of these relatives were interesting people, or so you thought at the time. Uncle Charlie had been to China. Aunt Bess made the best fudge on the block. Cousin Bill could read people's minds (according to him.) And all these relatives gave you Christmas presents.

But there was the other side. You had to give Christmas presents to all your relatives. And they all minded your business throughout the years. They wanted to know where you had been, where you were going, who you were going to marry, and why. And if they didn't like your answers, they said so. Not only your relatives minded your business, but everybody in the neighborhood did also. Again, this had its two sides.

If you walked on the railroad trestle, the phone would ring at your house. Your parents would know what you had done before you got back home. People on the street would tell you to button your jacket and ask you why you weren't in Church last Sunday. Not only was more than the family needed, but more than the family was provided. In an informal way, the whole community helped to raise the children in that community.

Children also had the run of the neighborhood. You were allowed to play in the park. You could go into any store, whether you bought anything or not. They would let you go ack of the store to watch them unpack the cartons and to hope that a carton would break. At the lumber yard, you could pick up good scraps of wood.

These memories of a gone childhood have been documented systematically in the research of Prof. Herbert Wright and his associates at the University of Kansas. The mid-western investigators have compared the daily life of children growing up in a small town with the lives of children growing up in a modern city or suburb. The contrast is sobering. Children in a small town got to know well a substantially greater number of adults in different walks of life and in contrast to their urban and suburban counterparts, were more likely to be active participants in the adult settings that they entered. Again, you see, not only was more than the family needed; more that the family was provided in a number of ways.

Now as the world of the small town and rural areas has be- come absorbed into an ever shifting suburban and urban world, children are growing up in a different kind of environment. The kind of larger family which informally existed as a part of the environment, no longer exists for many people. Now we have to provide similar experiences in some other way.

Mobility and urbanization have reduced the extended family that some of us knew in a small town. We now have a different kind of world. Many families have a small or larger circle of friends, accessible by automobile or telephone. Children more and more live in a separate world populated mostly by children of their own age. And too often adults too are separated by age. The opportunity to mingle and work and play with persons of all ages is various settings is rare.

Whereas the world in which the child lived before consisted of a diversity of people in a diversity of settings, now for millions of American children, the neighborhood is nothing but row upon row of buildings inhabited by strangers. One house or apartment is much like another and so are the people. They all have about the same income and the same way of life. And often the child doesn't see much of that. Many of the adults in the neighborhood come home, have a drink, eat dinner, mow the lawn, watch TV, and sleep.

Children often go to schools where they only meet more of their own. kind. They never really have a chance to ex-perience the rich diversity of people and experiences which make up our world. And they and we are the poorer for it. This is the sterile world in which many of the world's children grow. More than the family is needed, but it is not often provided.

It is sometimes provided. That is why in our own time it is clear that the children who tend to develop most favor-ably come from homes where the children have an opportunity meet and experience a variety of adults and social situations.

In fact, the success of some families in raising healthy and competent children reveals a number of surprising facts that often contradict some of our romantic notions about the nature of child-family relationship during the early years.

Many such families have throughout history engaged in multiple mothering techniques in bringing up their children. Maids and governesses have long been provided to share in the care of the children, partly to enrich the opportunities of the children and partly to relieve the mother of duties which would permit her to be away from her children and to permit her self-fulfilling kinds of opportunities which probably in the long run would enable her to be a better mother., Group care patterns have long existed and been accepted in our world.

The point is that far from a pattern of seclusion within the home, the children of such families enjoy a wide range 6. of experiences. They have often been more places which are interesting to them, met more people and in consequence learned much more than the child whose family seems on the surface to be more protective and nurturing. Here more than the family is needed, and more than the family is provided.

In such situations things like TV are really luxuries. I say this because sometimes persons drive through rather im-poverished areas and see TV aerials protruding from the homes and say, “These people hardly have enough to eat and yet they have TV sets.” But you see in such cases, those TV sets may be more necessary than they are in our homes. We can see and experience many of the things on TV first-hand, but they cannot.

One thing I would try to do would be to get some kind of TV in very home and then of course just as important, up-grade the programming a great deal; provide a new kind of environment. Sesame Street and Electric Company are examples.

Again, the point is that more than the family is needed, and this is true of all of us. Actually, our society long ago recognized that the nurture and education of children is far too complex and too important to assign responsibility altogether to the family. That’s why we have public schools. In fact, there is no family of father and mother anywhere who could do it all alone. And even if they could, the children would be missing the rich experience of knowing and interacting with other persons, young and old which is an integral part of any educational process. So as families we subcontract for many services.

During the ages between 6 and 16, most state laws require children to be in school. Because we’ve realized the im-portance of education and experiences outside the home, we’ve added to this with nursery schools, kindergartens and colleges through such formal structures and institutions society attempts to provide carefully arranged learning experiences, group activities and recreation. Through such things we are acknowledging that more than the family is needed if we are to have a healthy society.

And not only is this compact of society expressed through governmentally supported facilities like public schools, but private groups such as churches, and other voluntary organizations helpfully participate in the process of childrearing with children of all ages. It is no accident that the Christian church has pioneered in many countries and societies in getting such institutions

started. For it is our belief as Christians that God made us all of one family L and we have a responsibility for one another.

Furthermore, in our kind of complex and mobile society where many of the past infor111al structures of the larger family no longer exist, we need to make available even more comprehensive and coordinated services for children of all ages.

For too long we have blamed everything wrong in our society on the quality of our immediate family life in the home and by so doing have attempted to excuse ourselves from our responsibility of providing richer experiences outside the home. While certainly family life always needs to be strengthened, the fact is also that the quality of those things which are needed in addition to the family also need to be strengthened and broadened.

The fact further is that much responsibility for the upbringing of children has always existed outside the home. It used to exist more naturally and in informal ways and did not cost us money directly. Now we have to provide and establish structures and institutions, and they do cost money. But this is part of our Christian responsibility. We cannot isolate ourselves and have a healthy family in an unhealthy society. Amen.