Sunday, October 16, 1994
CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND SOCIETY
Luke 2:41-52

In the story from the Bible read earlier, we have a picture of a family with a problem. Jesus' parents had taken him to the city of Jerusalem, and on the way home, they assumed he was with the larger group as they traveled toward Nazareth. But after the first day's journey, in the evening, they realized he was not to be found. He had stayed behind in Jerusalem without telling his parents. Evidently, his parents had not checked to see if he was with the larger group of families when they began their homeward journey. Luke says they had supposed him to be in the company, and so they went a whole day's journey before they missed him. In the evening, they discovered he was not with them as they looked for him among their relatives and friends.

In hearing this story from Luke's gospel, someone might think, "His parents were not very good parents. They should've checked on him sooner." And others might comment, "Jesus was not a very responsible young man. He should've told his parents that he wanted to stay in Jerusalem a little longer."

We talk about the lack of communication between young people and adults in our time, yet this story shows that it is not a new problem. Joseph and Mary were operating on an unstated assumption, and so was their son. Jesus assumed that his parents were aware of his growing interest in the Jewish religious tradition and would know that he could be found in the temple talking with the teachers and scholars. Jesus was 12 years old and had no doubt already gone through the ceremony of bar mitzvah ("son of the law"), which means in religious terms he was an adult. They didn't worry about him. They assumed he was in the company of the larger family.

Furthermore, in those days, the care and raising of children were understood to be the responsibility of the larger community as well as of the immediate parents. This understanding that the raising of children was the responsibility of the larger community in addition to the responsibility of the immediate family 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 other community services.

As Christians, we also know that in the nurture of children, more than the immediate family is needed. That's why in the sacrament of infant baptism, the congregation is involved.

The congregation acknowledges its part of the covenant by saying, "On behalf of the whole Christian Church, we now receive this child into our love and care. We promise we will uphold these parents in the fulfillment of their vows and provide for all children full opportunities for Christian growth and nurture."

We have a responsibility for the child being baptized in addition to the primary responsibility of the parents. Here we are publicly affirming that more than the immediate family is needed. That's why we as a church provide Sunday church school classes, confirmation classes, and other programs for children and youth.

In the wider community as well, we know that more than the family is needed. The main reason for the founding of public schools in this country was to better educate young people.

It's to the benefit of all of us to have educated citizens. It helps with employment and is necessary for our form of government to survive.

Fortunately, we recognized many years ago that the nurture and education of children is far too complex and too important to assign responsibility entirely to the family. There is no family that 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. In our increasing technological society, even more and better education is needed.

Furthermore, in today's world, with more and more parents working outside the home, we've had to add preschools and childcare to what the family is able to do. In Nebraska, for example, the latest statistics show that almost 3 out of 4 children (73.5%) live in households where both parents or the only parent works outside the home. Childcare arrangements vary. In Nebraska, there were 2,316 registered childcare providers in 1989, and this increased to 3,651 in 1993.

And still, there's a shortage. In the Head Start program in Nebraska, 2,044 were enrolled in 1989, and 3,483 in 1993. However, there are 4,703 additional children eligible for Head Start, but there is no place for them.

Speaking of statistics, what is the leading cause of death for children and young people in Nebraska? The answer: motor vehicle accidents. In rural areas, it accounts for 21.2% of all deaths, and in metropolitan areas, 9.4%. It's the leading cause around the country.

So, on this day we call the "Children's Sabbath," when churches across the country are considering new and better ways to reach out to strengthen families and especially the children in families, it's important for us who profess to be Christians to recognize that in addition to strengthening the family unit itself, we need to be concerned about the broader institutions and influences in our society that affect our children's lives.

To put it another way, if we as Christians want to see that children grow up to be responsible, mature Christians and citizens, we have to be concerned about the immediate family and its health but also concerned about the community and society as a whole.

Increasingly, in our kind of world, no matter how good we are as parents, we cannot do everything that needs to be done all by ourselves.

Perhaps there was a time when most of the knowledge and influence of the world at large were selectively filtered through parental values to the children.

If you had lived on the frontier on a homestead without radio or television or the automobile, 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. Even the "Old Order Amish," who do their best to keep out the influences of the world around them, find it difficult to do so. Therefore, if we are really concerned about our own children and the children all around us, we will also be concerned about the direction and health of our community and society as a whole.

Now, lest you misunderstand, I am not at all de-emphasizing the importance of a strong and healthy family. Parents need to be good role models. We need to set good examples in

morality, ethics, and giving. But even when all of this is done, it is not enough, especially in our kind of world.

Part of what makes this so difficult to understand 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 to your home 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 not-so-good 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, or most of them. And they all minded your business throughout the years. They wanted to know where you had been, where you were going, and why?

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.

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 also provided. In an informal way, the whole community helped to raise the children in that community.

As the world of the small town and rural areas has become absorbed into an ever-shifting suburban and urban world, with more and more people crowding together and at the same time increasing anonymity, then add television and the automobile, children are growing up in a different kind of environment. The kind of larger family that informally existed as part of the environment no longer exists for many people. Now we need to provide similar experiences in other, more formal ways.

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

It won't happen automatically. We have to do it intentionally, and churches need to take the lead, as we have done so many other times. The first schools in this country were started by churches, as were the first orphanages, the first homes for the mentally disabled, and the first hospitals.

As Christians, we cannot isolate ourselves and have a healthy family in an unhealthy society. Amen.