



May 10, 2020
Rev. Dr. Mark J. Toone

Elevate (M)others Luke 2:41-52

Welcome to Mother's Day at Chapel Hill! I'm sorry we cannot be together in person! I always enjoyed seeing the Chapel Hill women arrayed in their finest...and the Chapel Hill men all present, gussied up and behaving themselves! Because all know how influential the women are in our lives, don't we guys?

Although I saw a comic strip that put that in perspective. Peppermint Patty asks Charlie Brown, "What surprises you most about the Coronavirus?" He replies, "It has accomplished what no woman has been able to do. Cancel all sports, shut down all bars and keep men at home." Well...to all of you...men AND women... who ARE worshiping from home this morning, welcome! And Happy Mother's Day!

We are continuing in our sermon series, "Elevate Others." In this season when it is so easy to focus on ourselves, we are looking for ways we can lift up and encourage those around us. And today, appropriately, we will Elevate (M)others.

Moms, I want to start by asking this: have you ever...misplaced...your child? If you have, put it in the chat. And why not point at the kid you lost! You might be chuckling now as you think about it...but I'll be you weren't laughing when it happened, were you?

ONE of the times we lost Cooper was when he was 3 years old. This week I asked Cyndi to refresh my memory on how it happened. She replied very tartly: "Two words: YOUR FAULT." I kind of braced myself for the rest of the story. It seems we were at church one night. Someone asked Cyndi to help in the kitchen. She came to me and said, "They need my help in the kitchen; can you watch Cooper?" Apparently...I said, "No problem." Or so she claims. I don't remember any of this.

Anyhow, Cyndi headed off to the kitchen. Thirty minutes later, she came back, walked over to me and said, "Where's Cooper?" And I offered the foolish and fatal words so many husbands have uttered before me: "I don't know!" "What do you MEAN you don't know!" she said. "You SAID you would watch Cooper!"

Frantically, we called out for help and sent everyone searching for our son. Finally, someone found him. In the parking lot. In between two rows of cars. In the dark. But he was fine! No harm, no foul, right dads? But my sweet Cyndi, the mother of my children, was LIVID!

This Mother's Day, we are going to see Mary, the sweet mother of our Lord, in a very different light. Our preferred image of Mary has her in a stable, surrounded by animals, nursing her newborn. But that was 12 years ago. Now Mary is raising a teenager. And in case you hadn't heard, that can be...challenging. Luke 2: 41-52.

Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom. And when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it, but supposing him to be in the group they went a day's journey, but then they began to search for him among their relatives and acquaintances, and when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, searching for him.

I don't know who to blame in this morning's story...so let's blame Joseph. It's probably a good bet, anyhow. They had travelled 80 miles from Nazareth to Jerusalem for Passover, one of the big three annual pilgrimages. And this would be particularly meaningful because Jesus was twelve years old. Soon, he would go through his Bar Mitzvah and be welcomed into manhood.

We aren't told anything about the actual festival, but after Passover, as they prepared for the journey home, here's what I imagine happened. Mary, who wanted to walk with the women, says to Joseph, "Can you watch Jesus?" And Joseph, who is yucking it up with his buddies, replies over his shoulder, "No problem."

So they travel a day's journey; 20 miles or so...like walking to Bremerton. They stop for the night. Mary finds Joseph and says, "Where's Jesus." And Joseph replies.... (Men...what were those famous and fatal words? Say them with me...) "I don't know!"

I won't speculate on what else the blessed virgin might have said at that point. Suffice it to say, they searched frantically...and NO Jesus. Since they had already traveled one day, they spent a sleepless night and, at dawn the second day, retraced their one-day journey BACK to Jerusalem. Now it's been TWO days. So let's pick up the story there:

After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. And when his parents saw him, they were astonished. And his mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress." And he said to them, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" And they did not understand the saying that he spoke to them. And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them.

And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart.

"His mother treasured up all these things in her heart." This isn't the first time we read those words in Luke's gospel. In chapter 1, right after the shepherds showed up in Bethlehem to

announce what the angels had told them, we read that “Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.” This morning’s story repeats that same phrase. So, first question: How do we know this? How did Luke know what Mary was treasuring in her heart? Well....I think she told him! I think Luke interviewed Mary before he wrote his gospel. If that assumption is correct, we are getting a firsthand account of this moment from Mary’s perspective.

Every parent has moments in their child’s life that they treasure...that they curate, if you will; when they put in a mental bookmark and say, “I’ll never forget this.” This was obviously one of those moments for Mary. Let’s take a closer look.

Mary was furious...and Joseph was silent. I always assumed this was because HE was so mad he dare not speak. But Cyndi set me straight on this. She says this was a Mama Bear moment. When Mama Bear’s cubs are in danger... EVERYONE... steers a wide berth. ESPECIALLY Papa Bear. Joseph WISELY kept his head down and his mouth shut. AT least...that’s Cyndi’s take on the story. Women, why don’t you use the chat to vote on whether or not you agree with her interpretation! And men...you might want to just skip this vote.

After three days of fruitless search, Mary and Joseph make their way into the Temple. And there...they hear a familiar voice. Jesus...surrounded by the religious hot shots of the time. Asking questions...fielding questions. Holding court with the most esteemed religious minds of the day. He probably didn’t even notice when Mary came storming up, scattering the Pharisees who were stupid enough to be in her way.

And then... she let loose! “Son...why have you treated us so?” Actually, the Greek doesn’t say, “Son.” It says, “teknon;” “child!” “Child!...why have you treated us so?” (She is chewing him out!) And then she plays the dad card. You know, like when your mom said, “You just wait until your father gets home!!!” Mary says, “Look...your FATHER and I have been searching for you in great distress.” And Joseph’s in the background, nodding dutifully.

Then...Jesus responds. This is significant, because these are the first recorded words of our Lord. Are you ready? Calmly Jesus replies, “Why were you looking for me?” OK...could we agree that this might be 12-year-old Jesus talking? “Why were you looking for me?” What were they supposed to do? Just continue on to Nazareth and hope that he would thumb a ride home? Jesus might be on the verge of manhood...but he was still their son; still under their roof. So...let’s admit that MAYBE his opening salvo were the words of a young man who could not possibly understand the anguish he had just put his parents through.

But then...then comes his punchline. “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” Here’s what’s interesting about that translation. The word “house” is not in the original Greek. Literally, the text says, “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s _____.” Literally, we have to fill in the blank. Maybe he meant house. But it could also mean, “Did you not know that I must be about my Father’s business...or my Father’s will.... or my Father’s plans.” Any way

you cut it, Jesus wasn't just talking about a building. He was talking about his calling...his authority...the destiny for which he had come to earth.

Another thing to note about this story is, it's the last time we ever see Joseph in the Bible. We assume he died when Jesus was still a young man. I find this interesting because, when Mary complains bitterly that Jesus' father was looking for him... in essence, Jesus replies, "No he wasn't; my father knew where I was all along." So Joseph—the earthly dad of Jesus--recedes into the background...and Jesus' heavenly father assumes the prominent role in his life.

There is an obvious shift taking place; Mary is stunned into silence by Jesus' response. She says nothing more. We are told that they "did not understand" what Jesus said. And as they return home, the passage ends with Mary "treasuring all these things in her heart." That means mulling...considering...preserving. Everything she had just experienced...the things she understood...and the things that were still a mystery to her...all of them Mary treasured.

You remember the dragon Smaug in Tolkien's *The Hobbit*? Smaug guarded the great treasure of the Dwarf Kingdom, Erebor. One of the amazing things about my wife is the way she guards the treasure trove of memories of her children. She remembers everything very intentionally. Our family took sabbatical in Scotland in 2007 when Cooper was about ten. He was still at an age when he would reach up and hold my hand as we walked. Cyndi lagged behind and took pictures whenever she saw this, capturing every moment she knew would pass all too soon. And I treasure those pictures.

Mary came to treasure this moment in the temple. It meant so much to her that Luke included it in his gospel; the only story we have from the childhood of Jesus. It was a defining moment for him and for her; a moment that set the trajectory for the future; a moment in which Mary saw her son in a new light.

Of course, she had always known her boy was special. The angels and shepherds and magi...all told her the same thing. All announced that her firstborn would be very special... the son of God, in fact.

She hadn't forgotten this. But it HAD been twelve years. Twelve years of diapers, feedings, cleaning, educating, entertaining...not to mention the addition of a bunch of other kids to the equation. After 12 years...and eight more children...Mary could be forgiven if the awe and wonder that had attended the birth of Jesus...had faded a bit.

But in this moment, she snapped back to reality. As she watched her son hold the religious leaders spellbound...as she listened to his composed response to her frantic question...it suddenly struck her: "Oh my goodness! I am raising the Messiah; my son is the Chosen One." She realized that her "child" (as she called him in anger)... wasn't a child at all. He had begun a journey that would take him out of their family, out of Nazareth and into the destiny for which

God had sent him. Mary didn't understand all the implications of this story, but she treasured the mystery of this life-defining moment.

I guess this has been a Cooper story day (sorry, Rachel). But I've got another one for you. Coop had significant developmental issues in the early years of his life. He had no small, and few large motor skills. He never spoke to anyone outside his family...and rarely spoke to us. He had no friends. And he never, ever, looked anyone in the eye. At times, Cyndi would literally take Cooper by his cheeks and say, "Cooper...look at me!"

When we took him to be evaluated prior to his kindergarten year, we watched him fail test after test. And in that moment, we knew that our idea of what it meant to parent our son had shifted dramatically. So we set ourselves to it. We put him in all kinds of therapy. Cyndi worked with him every day. We developed a special plan with the school district; they provided a para-educator for him. And...we readjusted our expectations. This was our new normal.

So...if you'd told us in that moment... that five years later, Cooper would be nominated by his fifth-grade class to be their graduation speaker... that he would stand up in front of that room full of students and parents, delivering his speech...complete with lots of eye contact with his audience... we would NEVER have believed it possible. Nor would his teachers. Many of them were in the back of the room, weeping as Cooper spoke. In that moment... we suddenly had a glimpse of the friendly, gregarious, articulate, outgoing man that Cooper would one day become. It was an epiphany. A perception-altering moment as vivid today as it was 20 years ago.

That moment in the temple was just such an epiphany for Mary. Suddenly, she saw her son in a new way...and it reshaped her relationship with him forever.

Obviously, Mary's child was unique. The Son of God. But moms... and surrogate moms: each of your children is unique, too! Each of your children has been created by God for a purpose. Each has a destiny to be fulfilled. You may not understand it...you may not yet see it in its fullness... but you must believe it. And treasure the mystery of it!

Remember, you are only a caretaker of your kids; they do not belong to you. You are stewarding them for a season, but there will come a time when God says, "OK... let her go. Let him go. I have great plans for them...but you must let them go."

Moms...do you believe that? Do you believe that God has a claim upon your children's lives? Do you see your primary task as preparing them to discover that call and live into it? It is the single most important parenting job you have! And who knows how God is using even this season of quarantine to accomplish this work?

I know...many of you are ready to pull your hair out. You are so done with quarantine! So tired of finding new ways to entertain your children... that you are going crazy. But let me assure you

of something: 20 years from now, when you sit down around a Thanksgiving meal with your clan...when you reminisce on this era... you might joke about the challenges of it. You might boast about who had it the hardest. But what you will TREASURE are the uninterrupted days you shared with your children; something that will likely never be repeated in your lifetime.

One young Chapel Hill mom has asked her two kids nearly every day of this quarantine, "Ok, what was the best thing about today?" And nearly every time, the answer is the same: "Mommy and Daddy school." You may be tired of it all right now...but one day, you will treasure these memories. And so will your kids. Because God is using this time to link your hearts together and to shape their hearts for his kingdom.

One last Cooper story. When Cooper was in third grade, he wanted to ask Cyndi something. She was kneeling down, occupied with some task... and...honestly...multi-tasking is not one of my bride's greatest gifts; she is very focused! Finally, in frustration, Cooper went over to her, grabbed her by the cheeks and said, "Mommy...look at me!"

You have no idea how what you are doing is shaping and aligning your child for the destiny for which God created them. For that moment when suddenly, THEY take hold of their life and calling and pursue it...with you as their chief cheerleader. You are preparing for that moment even now. So...I urge you...as best you are able... treasure up all these things in your heart!

You know...that moment when Jesus was 12 is not the last time Mary lost her son in Jerusalem. Twenty years later, she lost him again. To a horrific death on a cross. This time, she didn't come looking for him; what was the point? But the risen Jesus came looking for her... and for the rest of us. It turns out, WE were the ones who were lost all along. But Jesus sought us...found us...and saved us. Treasure THAT in your heart!