

LOSS AND LETTING GO

Holy Family Sunday – C

It's been over thirty years since the Defendorf family's vacation trip to the Outer Banks of North Carolina. Actually, I remember very little about what we did or the sights we saw.

What I do remember is the panic that Pat and I experienced when our then 9 year old son Christopher wandered away from the beach.

For the next hour we searched high and low.

- Had he wandered into the water and drowned?
- Had he been kidnapped?

Actually, Chris, as even then was his inclination, had found another family to visit with and engage in inquisitive conversation. Eventually, he wandered back to our campsite, totally unaware of the anguish and guilt that his parents had experienced during his unannounced departure.

Losses are a common experience of most families. If not the loss of a child, there's the experience of a lost pet, or even the loss of a home through fire, flood or hurricane.

Loss touches us most deeply when we experience the death of loved ones. Those losses are branded onto our memories.

As we get in touch with our personal experiences of loss, we can put ourselves into the shoes of Mary and Joseph. They were a typical family doing something they did every year - heading to Jerusalem for their Passover pilgrimage.

They traveled in caravan, probably walking the 65 or so miles with family and friends from Nazareth. The adults shared in adult conversation. The young folks, exciting about the adventure, let off energy by running ahead of the group and having fun along the way.

The family arrived in Jerusalem, celebrated the Passover and began the return trip. It was only at the end of the first day's travel that one boy was missed - Jesus.

What panic must have flooded over the whole caravan - a lost child!

The fear in the hearts of the parents was almost debilitating! There was a cavernous hole where their hearts belonged! Emptiness. Guilt! Sorrow! Fear! Where was he?

The world of Mary and Joseph turned upside down! God had given them a tremendous responsibility and they had failed! They remembered the prophecy of Simeon twelve years earlier, "a sword shall pierce your heart."

Was this it? Was Jesus to be the Passover Lamb of God - now at age twelve?

They didn't know and not knowing lent a terrible sharpness to their pain.

Trust. Blind trust was a needle-thin light poking a slender hole in their darkness.

Years later, did Mary revisit this pain, this loss, on another Passover feast when the Lamb of God was sacrificed on the wood of the cross?

Was the agony of the three days following that ultimate loss reminiscent of these three days?

All of us experience loss in our lives. Sometimes the lost is found and there is great relief and great rejoicing!

Other times the needle-thin light of trust goes out and we are left in the darkness of what seems an unredeemed loss.

Whenever there is loss and we sit in the darkness, we are called to learn the painful lesson of letting go.

Letting go is inevitable in life. Actually it's the only way that we can grow. At every stage, there is a letting go in order to grow.

Letting go always involves loss as well as fear of the unknown. It's part of us physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. As we grow in each of these areas, we leave behind souvenirs of our past.

It would be laughable if, as we grew physically, we tried to keep the trappings of the past

- women wearing pigtails and baby doll slippers;
- men carrying around action figures and plastic guns.

But as we grow, we put these aside.

- Mentally, as we grow, we let go of childish ideas, always seeking deeper and broader truths.
- Emotionally, we set aside the need for being taken care of. We grow into the independence of giving and receiving adult love.

- Growing spiritually also means letting go of childish ways. Of its essence, it is relating with God as a loving adult in a relationship of give and take.

Adult spirituality includes being unselfishly concerned about our brothers and sisters - all of humanity!

It's not just concern, but also taking action regarding justice and peace issues. It means valuing life in all its aspects and having that value as a guiding principle in our economic, political and social lives.

In all of this growth, we experience the sense of loss, fear and even panic that Mary and Joseph went through when Jesus was 12. They found him on the third day.

Many years later, though it's not recorded in Scripture, Jesus finds his mother on the third day. For her, the lifetime of relying on a needle-thin ray of trust bursts into the full brilliance of the resurrection!

As we experience loss, fear, panic, may we too - let go in trust.

When we don't understand these events in our lives, may we too - let God take charge.

And as we let go and grow, may we reach out to our brothers and sisters to assist them in their losses.

May we help bring the light of hope into their lives.

May we let go, in order to grow, until that day of final letting go arrives and we enter into the glorious light of the Kingdom of God!