

# Responsibility One

Luke 2:21-35

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By Dr. Dwight Kilbourne

On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived. When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons." Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too." (Luke 2:21-35)

**Introduction.** In my opinion there is no human task more challenging and important. Patty and I have raised three sons who are now out on their own. Our oldest is married and has our only grandchild and serves as a pastor, our middle son will be married this coming weekend and will serve as an associate

pastor, and our youngest is single and teaches school. We have had a lot of experience as parents, but I will readily confess I do not know or understand all there is to know about parenting.

One of the amazing things about parenting is God designed the process where we begin a first-born. A couple starts the process and to them is born a baby. They are entrusted with a human life, even though they have never had experience in this area before. Unlike a new car, the infant does not come with an owner's manual that tells you when maintenance is needed, what the warning lights mean and how to turn off the radio in the middle of the night. That newborn is delivered into this world "naked." The couple must figure out how to keep this child alive and nurture her to become a healthy, mature and productive human being. That is a huge mission, especially when the child comes without instructions. Yet billions of couples have taken up the challenge and many have done and do a pretty good job.

**Responsibility One.** In our scripture lesson, Luke gives us a rare glimpse into the parenting of Jesus by his parents Mary and Joseph. This is unique because none of the gospels tell of how Jesus' was nurtured following his birth. It seems that Luke lifts up Mary and Joseph as a model of good parents in this chapter.

Luke highlights for us that Joseph and Mary carried out three religious ceremonial practices following the birth of Jesus. While each of these was unique to their religious culture, we can see and draw parallels to our own practices as Christians. What they did demonstrated they took seriously from the beginning of being parents their spiritual responsibility as parents. It was for them *responsibility one*.

According Jewish custom and law, a male child was to be circumcised eight days after birth. This practice dated back to the time of Abraham and was codified in the Jewish Law of Moses. This act was not a surgical act related to health or a cosmetic act. Rather it was a sign of the covenant this person and the Jewish community had in relationship with God.

Through this act, the child was identified with the religious community. At eight days of age, Jesus was circumcised.

The second ceremonial observance we find in our text relates directly to Mary, the mother of Jesus. According to the Jewish Law (Leviticus 12), a woman who gave birth to a son was to go through a period of purification for 33 days and if she gave birth to a daughter the time was 66 days. (I am not going to speculate about why the difference in the number because I probably would get myself into some hot water.) During those days, the mother was to avoid touching sacred objects and entering the temple courtyard. Then after that time, the mother was to go to the temple to offer a sheep or two turtledoves or pigeons as a sacrifice. Mary followed the Jewish practice.

The third ceremonial act was the consecration or redemption of the first born child. According to this law, the parents were to bring an offering of five shekels of silver to the temple to redeem the child (Numbers 18:15-16). Luke blurs together the purification and consecration acts. But he communicates that Mary and Joseph observe these.

If we were to read into the next story line in this chapter, we would discover that annually, Mary and Joseph would take Jesus to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover.

It is clear that these parents took seriously their spiritual and religious responsibilities. They nurtured Jesus in the faith and integrated him into the religious community. This example is important for today's Western parents to understand. In his reflections about this passage, NIB contributor, Alan Culpepper writes: *This episode merits careful reflection among modern Christians. The observance of religious requirements and rituals has fallen on hard times* (NIB, IX, 74).

Culpepper is correct about our need to reflect on this issue. Today, there are several sources of pressure that can squeeze out the observance of religious observance by parents that does detriment to children and youth's spiritual well-being.

One of these is what I label the Triple A – academics, arts and athletics.

Each of these is important in the development of our children and each competes for their time and attention. In the quest to excel in these areas, parents and children can invest an inordinate amount of time that robs other important or more important endeavors. Being a parent of only yesterday, I understand how any and all of these demand large segments of time and energy. As parents, we often feel guilty if we fail to give our child every opportunity in each of these areas and make every event.

During the early years of our sons, they loved athletics. In the communities where we lived, games and matches were not held on Wednesday evenings in respect for mid-week church services. After a few years that changed. By the time our boys were in Middle School and High School, Sunday morning had become fair game for all sorts of tournaments. Because of my vocation and our family's faith, that was not an option for our sons. I do not believe they were warped because of that. (The warping had more to do with the genetics and raising they had from their father.)

While there is great value in the Triple A's, it is easy to allow one or all of them to take more and more time in our children's lives usually at the expense of faith and family. Parents have a heavy responsibility trying to balance all of these important activities in the lives of their children. Our children lack the resources to do so. Each area does not manage that as well. Parents must manage the time and balance the activities. Remember there are some words parents can use: "No." "Not this time." "Later." Parenting today demands parents be proactive and plan the use of time.

A second pressure that squeezes out the spiritual nurture of our children is the time commitments and priorities of parents. All of us are busy people with lots of demands on our time. As parents, we must look at our own time commitments and determine how we can allot our time to nurture our children spiritually.

I have a confession to make. I have been a pastor for more than 30 years. During the time my boys were home, I often allowed what I perceived as my

ministry demands to crowd out time I needed to spend with my sons in relationship and spiritual nurture. I have spent 5 straight nights at meetings at church. I have come home too tired to listen or to play. By the grace of God and the marvelous nurture of their loving mother, they have turned out to be great kids.

A third pressure is a part of the culture of this postmodern era. There is huge anti-institutional religious sentiment in our world. Many people dislike and mistrust "organized religion." They feel they can be spiritual, even Christian, apart from the Church. Many believe they can raise their children without any real need for the church and connecting them to the community of faith. Some think it may be detrimental to children to expose them to church.

The Church has its issues and problems. I too believe we must be the church beyond these walls and our spiritual lives can be and typically are nurtured outside these walls. But the church, the community of believers, the body of Christ is invaluable. It is a creation of God. Jesus died for the sake of the church. Christ established the church as his body in this world. If it were not for the Church, there would be little opportunity for Christian faith today. This world would be a different place and it would not be for the better.

I am not sure how to change the attitude of many who are suspicious of the church. I guess we must choose to faithfully follow Christ and nurture our children in the faith as faithfully as we can. We can choose to do what is needful in terms of spiritual nurture.

One of the high moments in the life of any congregation is when a mother and father stand before God and the people to present their child for baptism. It is more than a ritual or ceremony or a time for everyone to see the baby. It is a divine moment in which God is present. During that service, the parents are asked, "Will you nurture this child in Christ's holy church, that by your teaching and example she may be guided to accept God's grace for herself and to profess her faith openly and to lead a Christian life?"

That is an enormous question which affirms what we as United Methodists believe about parenting – providing spiritual nurture for our children is responsibility #1. Parents nurture their children through their teaching and example. Attending these responsibilities is critical and no one can do it as they can.

It is difficult to think about this commitment without being reminded of the most significant passage in the OT – Schema – *Hear O Israel, the Lord thy God is One. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your might* (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). While these words are central to our Judeo-Christian faith, what is recorded immediately following is vital to our parenting: "*Recite these to your children and talk about them when you are home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.*" The spiritual nurture of our children is to be a daily activity that takes place in every context we find ourselves.

**Divine Moments.** When Mary and Joseph brought their infant son to the temple on that day, they encountered more than they had expected. They had a divine encounter that was communicated through one of God's servants. He affirmed Jesus' nature and mission. He was to be the source of salvation – light to the Gentiles and radiant glory for the Jews. Can you imagine what joy flooded the hearts of these parents when they heard these words?

What if they had not gone to present Jesus? They would have robbed their child of this special announcement and encounter with God. They would have missed the joy of hearing this revelation about their son. Today, when we fail to attend to the rites and rituals of the Christian community for our children, we rob them and ourselves of these types of divine encounters.

None of us know what might happen any time we bring our children, youth or grandchildren to this place for worship, Sunday School or a special event. We do not know what will happen when we take them to church camp or when they go to a retreat like Resurrection or

Chrysalis. Any of these may be the time when they will have a life transforming or forming experience with the Living God. It might be a time our hearts are touched, strengthened, encouraged and revived. Being faithful prevents us from being robbed of those divine encounters.

**Invitation.** Nurturing our children spiritually is the number one responsibility of parents. Of course, there are some parents who are not doing this so grandparents and relatives have stepped into the gap. In some situations, there are no family members, but for some, followers of Jesus have taken up the call.

In a real sense, all of us play a role here. We can support parents and their work through our actions and prayers. We can help with ministries that touch children.

Prayer for Parents – caregivers