

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“Community”

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Jan. 2, 2022

“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” (Lk. 2:43-44).

It was a classic, smalltown childhood for me in Delavan. Especially in the summer, the neighborhood kids pretty much had the run of the neighborhood. Big games of kick the can, softball, hide and seek, and on rainy days, Risk, Monopoly, Battleship, Life. We moved freely and fluidly from yard to yard, house to house. When it was time for dinner mom would step out onto the back stoop and vigorously ring a small bell. (I think my mouth would still water at the sound of that bell.) If we didn’t come running, she’d pick up our scent by calling the Langhoffs or the Koepnicks, the Sebranicks or the Wheelers. Supervision of the neighborhood kids was a shared responsibility, not just by the parents, but by the retirees too. I’ll never forget the scolding I received from Mr. Wendorf when I rode my bike in front of a passing car.

Delavan is not that way anymore. Watertown is not that way anymore. Our communities and neighborhoods have changed. Parents have to know where their kids are every minute of every day. Pick-up games of softball at the intersection of back yards have been replaced by organized soccer practices at the other end of town. Instead of moving fluidly from house to house, there are play dates with a friend from school, usually not in the same neighborhood, but scattered, their parents vetted. Boundaries between back yards are known and children are reluctant to cross them. And heaven forbid that anyone, save the parents, should ever scold a child. That’ll bring out the mama bears and papa bears.

We talk about the disintegration of the American family, and it is truly tragic. Just as tragic is the disintegration of the community trust. Children need more care than just a single mom can provide, or even the nuclear family. They need community. They need a crowd of role models.

You know the story about Mary and Joseph taking Jesus, who is twelve, to Jerusalem. His parents went there every year to observe the Passover. It’s a treasured account about a young Jesus impressing the temple teachers with his understanding and insightful questions and His sure sense of identity. “Did you not know I must be in my Father’s house” he asked his parents. Before that, however, in the middle of the narration, there is a bit of precious insight into an ancient culture. The people from Nazareth are walking home in a sort of caravan, visiting as they go, renewing old relationships . . . making new friendships. Luke 2:44 reads, “Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, Joseph and Mary went a day’s journey. (A whole day without laying eyes on their 12 year old son!) Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends.”

It is a description of a cultural norm. Apparently, Mary and Joseph don’t feel the need to have constant, personal supervision over Jesus. The expectation of that day is that the child is fine because He’s with the community. The community is taking care of him.

We think about this from a 2022 perspective, and it makes us shudder. This is not our norm. Today, this would be considered gross negligence. We cannot entrust a child to the crowd’s supervision anymore. Community, any community, is built on trust, and the loss of that affects us all, but especially the children.

Admittedly, this is not the main point of this text. Yet it exposes the erosion within our communities. Even in Watertown, kids live near neighbors right next door who don’t know their names. Kids spend massive amounts of time home alone and are therefore overexposed to social media. School delinquency, juvenile crime, drug and alcohol abuse, promiscuity, cyber bullying, all these are problems for the children of Watertown. Many of them don’t have many adult role models. Community youth programs and neighborhood churches may be completely irrelevant to them.

This is where community must fill the gap. There’s an old biblical command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Of course, that includes the younger neighbors too. Protect them, intercede for them, help keep an eye

on them. Listen and talk to them. Get to know them. Memorize their names. Let them know you care. Stand up for and support them. Be a role model for them. Become more involved in the community, and more supportive of our schools and youth organizations.

What else? This community called Good Shepherd is trying to make a difference. I think we can feel good about the things going on here. In the pre-school and the Christian Day School here, real ministry happens every single day, in just about every single room, whether it's the principal's or the secretary's or the Fellowship Hall. Then add to that our Sunday School, VBS, Confirmation classes, our Youth Group, Family Nights. We rotate regularly into Bread and Roses and Fishes and Loaves has a direct impact on children. Similarly we support the Watertown Food Pantry, and Sandwiches in the Park and Food to Go and Grow and Operation Christmas Child for children in the global community. A big step we've taken recently is the Safe Families program, which strives to keep children safe and families intact. It helps keep kids with their parents and out of foster care, which is shown overall to be better for children. There's more, but all this happens in safe, bright, clean, Christ-centered environments, where children know they are welcomed and loved.

We're doing good. But can we do better? Can we do more? Of course we can, if all of us engage in this important work.

Keep in mind, also, that we are only doing what we say we'll do whenever we baptize babies. The main thing is that God is washing the child clean of sin and claiming the child to be His own. But another part of baptism is about the community. That infant is not only claimed by God, but also by this congregation. That child not only receives the love of God, but should also receive the love of this congregation. That's why I prefer baptisms to happen within the worship services so you can see the children and families we are trying to support. At a baptism, not only the parents and the sponsors, but the entire congregation is given the responsibility to help that child grow in the faith. As the community of Good Shepherd, we're doing good, but we can do better if each of us makes a concerted effort.

It must have been like a nightmare for Mary and Joseph when they realized Jesus was not with them. What parent doesn't know that panic? They had traveled a day away from Jerusalem, probably about 15 miles. It would take a day to come back, and they wouldn't find the boy Jesus until the third day. When they did find him, you can imagine their reaction. Relief and joy and some anger and confusion all rolled into one. And gratitude too, to the old teachers in the temple who were with him, and to those nameless persons who must have cared for him and given him food to eat and a safe place to stay. The boy Jesus tried to explain to his parents that he had to be about His Father's business, but Luke says Mary and Joseph didn't really understand this. They were just glad to have him back and they wanted to go home to Nazareth.

There would be another day, years later in his life, when Jesus was again in Jerusalem, and again it was during the Passover celebration, and again he was about His Father's business. . . for you and me. Once again, He's cut off from His people, even from His Father in heaven. This time the community isn't taking care of Him. This time, the community is putting Him to death.

Joseph, it seems, is already deceased. It's only Mary now, and she's experiencing a little bit of hell on earth. As He is arrested and prosecuted and sentenced, she must have felt she failed. If she had only kept her eyes on Him, demand that He stay in Nazareth, demand that He be about His father's business as a carpenter. Mary and the others tried to warn Him; they tried to bring Him back to Nazareth, but He wouldn't listen, refused to listen to them. And now He's on a cross, and there's nothing she or anyone else can do about it but watch Him die.

But this is exactly why He had come. There on the cross, He is about His Father's business. He is the Lamb of God at Passover, whose blood was shed to save you and me. He is not just Mary's boy, but God's Son, sent by the Father to redeem the world from sin and death and the devil. This is His Father's business.

Again, it would be three days before Mary's anguish became mixed with relief. Three days before the tears would be mixed with confusion and laughter and joy. Three days before Mary was so relieved and confused and happy that she could hardly understand anything Jesus said.

This is the living Savior who died and rose to forgive and save us. This is the Lamb of God who has taken away your sin. This is the Lord who said, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them." This is our Creator and Redeemer who exhorted us to look after each other, to be our brother's keeper, to love our neighbors (all of them, also the younger ones) as ourselves. Amen.