

Modus Operandi –the Holy Family

sermon digest

January 1, 2012

Luke 2:41-52

larry dipboye

If you watch too many detective shows, you might know the meaning of the Latin phrase *modus operandi*. The M.O. of a criminal is the “mode of operation,” peculiar characteristics of behavior left at a crime scene, a kind of criminal signature. But the Latin phrase is not restricted to criminal behavior. Every family has an M.O. and leaves a trail of breadcrumbs, or sometimes broken limbs, in the wake of its journey through life.

Fifty years ago at this time, I was newly married, visiting with my wife’s family for our first Christmas together. I recall my startled reaction when I was advised around Thanksgiving of the plan. The Martin family had always observed Christmas in Wagoner, Oklahoma. In her entire life, my wife had never been at home for Christmas. Christmas and Wagoner were synonyms. Wagoner was where my wife’s parents grew up, met and married. All of the grandparents lived in Wagoner, and Wagoner was where all of the aunts and uncles and cousins could be found on Christmas day. Her father was in retail, and the family usually could not get away until the store had closed. She recalled one Christmas Eve an all night drive to be in Wagoner on Christmas morning, so the 300 miles from Fort Worth to Wagoner was nothing in this family history. Besides, we were on school schedules and had a couple of weeks free for the holidays.

In the Dipboye tradition, Christmas was a time for the nuclear family in the place we called home. My family also had Oklahoma roots, but we never thought of going there for Christmas. I was naive enough to think that my family had it right, but I was learning an important lesson from marriage. Families are not all alike, and adjusting to different family traditions is a part of the “for better or worse” deal, so we were in Wagoner for Christmas. That was the Martin family M.O.

Parents tend to project the family M.O. Mary and Joseph formed their family through the merger of marriage. No doubt their families had unique traditions that had to be reconciled; but since both were Jewish peasants, they shared a common faith tradition and probably similar family habits. Nevertheless, conflicts had to be resolved. Matthew records the inner-struggle of Joseph about Mary’s pregnancy, suggesting that the couple were not free to do as they pleased. His decision to put Mary away (divorce) quietly was a struggle with community expectations. Certain community values and rules were expected that had zero tolerance for a sexually promiscuous woman. In fact, the M.O. of Judaism was conformity to religious expectations, obedience to the Law. Both Luke and Matthew note the difficulty created by Mary’s pregnancy, but it is resolved “quietly,” we might say in secret, in a way that allows the family to gather around the birth of a child.

Why did Luke insert the only account of the boyhood of Jesus between the birth and ministry of the Messiah? According to some early Christians, Jesus was not “born” the Son of God, he was *adopted* at his baptism when the voice from heaven affirmed the obedience of Jesus with the strong embrace, “my Son.” Luke provides a bridge between birth and baptism which affirms the continuity of the child with the man Jesus. The unique person of Jesus could be traced from birth to death.

Luke avoided the pitfall of some early Christian writings which described Jesus as a child with the power of a god, much as one would imagine a military tank with a child at the controls. “Infancy Gospels,” mostly from the third or fourth centuries, have been uncovered that wildly speculate about a boy magician who behaves like a monster in a Stephen King novel. He plays tricks on friends, including killing a boy for running into him, and magically changes the length of boards in the carpenter shop. In one story, “super boy” makes twelve clay birds (twelve apostles?) for playthings on the Sabbath. When drawing the attention of the censors for violating the Law of Sabbath, he breathed on the toys, and they came to life and flew away. The stories are apocryphal (hidden), at best, and perhaps more accurately identified as *pseudopigrapha* (false writings). None of this can be found in our Gospels. If anything, the discovery of these “apocryphal” Gospels should enhance our confidence in the picture of Jesus in our New Testament.

Luke, however, made a clear statement of faith about the Christ without any further reference to the miraculous conception which dominates the birth narrative. Jesus, born the Son of God, was the Son of God at every stage of his development. Luke carefully tracks the conformity of Mary and Joseph with Jewish traditions. The boy was circumcised on the eighth day, and the parents offered a sacrifice exactly as the Law commanded, “a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons.” The baby was

dedicated, presented to God, at six weeks, the time of the mother's purification rite. Luke then leaps over the next twelve years: "When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him."

Conformity with the Jewish Law is the family M.O. At age twelve the Holy Family traveled from Nazareth to Jerusalem for the Passover, "as usual." Craddock calls this *bar mitzvah*, the age at which the Jewish boy enters adulthood and is affirmed as a "son of the Law." After the seven-day festival, the family heads for home, and Jesus cannot be found among relatives or friends. You can almost sense the panic, when they find Jesus three days later in the Temple "sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions." Except for the anxiety he caused his parents by his obsession with matters of faith, the incident in the temple could hardly be called bad behavior; but it was a case of nonconformity with family expectations.

Children tend to envision objectives beyond the family M.O. Jesus comes across as the typical teen with a mind of his own and a vision for life that his parents cannot see. The frustration of Mary and Joseph in the Temple is a familiar emotion for any parent with a precocious child, indeed, with a normal child. Peter Storey (*Christian Century*, Dec 13, 2000, p. 1299) suggests that this is a "censored version." He asks, "What parents would leave a crowded city—one that was not their home—and journey a whole day without noting that their child was missing?" He further wonders, "what Jewish momma, finding her missing child after three days, would simply be 'astonished?'"

Storey suggests that perhaps this is a case of parental neglect as much as a child's disobedience. The parental frustration is picked up again in Mark 3. Joseph is not mentioned here, only his mother and siblings, leading to the speculation that Joseph has left Mary a widow and Jesus the oldest son as the man of the house responsible for the family. The family attempts to pull Jesus away from the public ministry partially for his own protection, and the same Jesus who tells his parents in the Temple, "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" responds to the word of his family waiting to take him home: "'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'" Mary appears twice in John's Gospel at the beginning of her son's ministry in the miracle of changing water to wine at the wedding of Cana of Galilee. Again, the response of Jesus is a statement of nonconformity: "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." Finally, the mother appears at the crucifixion, and the crucified one affirms his mother and assigns her care to the beloved disciple.

Regardless of how they might seem to parents, children eventually grow up to make their own choices in life, right or wrong, and to find their own M.O. I recall my conversation with my father shortly after I had graduated from high school. I had made a commitment to a life of ministry at the age of sixteen. I was young, but serious about a call to ministry. About half of the kids in my church were either going to be missionaries or pastors, and an amazing number of us carried through with the commitment. With good counsel from my youth director, I had been accepted for admission to Baylor University and planned to go on to seminary from there. Dad could not quite understand my choices in life. He called me aside to persuade me to give up the nonsense about ministry and further education. Our family M.O. called for working in the plants around home, but Dad accepted my choice in life and supported my determination even though he did not understand it.

A funny thing happened on my son's way to adulthood. I found myself in my father's role of groaning about his decision to major in Japanese. Surely he would end up as a street person totally without a vocation or means of making a living. I eventually learned to just step aside and hope for the best.

John Westerhoff, III, observed that we have our children when we are least prepared emotionally and intellectually to care for them. Yet, the Christian educator offers a significant piece of advice for young parents: "We need to make the religious aspect of our lives a priority. . .to make our growth in faith our first commitment in terms of time and energy. Only then can we deal with our own anxiety, admit that we will never be the perfect parent, and acknowledge that our children are in God's hands." Looking back on the whole of the Gospel, I have reached a conclusion about them and about most of the rest of us. Jesus became who he was because of the parents who helped to shape his life. Jesus

became who he was in spite of the parents who attempted to shape his life. Such is the mystery of life with our God.