

ANTHONY STRAUSS – 5 JANUARY 2012

“She kept these things in her heart.”

How could it have happened? Mary and Joseph both lost track of Jesus. They didn't know where he was. Mary thought he was with Joseph, while Joseph thought he was with Mary. How could this happen? Were they just careless? No, not at all. We have to know that at the time of Jesus, people didn't live very long, so it was necessary for young people to marry and have children as soon as they were able, while still strong and healthy. As a result, the transition between childhood and adulthood was very short. At 12, Jesus, apparently a normal kid like anyone else, stood at the threshold between childhood (when he was under the care of his mother) and early manhood (when he came under the guidance of his stepfather.) We might think of this story as a “Bar Mitzvah” type of moment. Mary apparently journeyed under the false impression that Jesus, having come of age, was now in Joseph's care. For Joseph's part, he figured Jesus was still under his mother's care. Neither parent was at fault for doing anything wrong.

On the other hand, Jesus, who is like us in all ways but sin, was filled with adolescent enthusiasm and a lack of comprehension of the world's dangers, like any other 12 year old of his time ... or ours. Instead of leaving for home, he felt an inner call that urged him to go back to the temple, without giving thought that his mom and dad might wonder where he went. It never crossed his mind that he was doing something that would upset them. Was he acting immaturely? Yes. For all his brilliant intelligence, he was still a boy in need of parental guidance. Immaturity is not a sin. Never was and never will be. That's why, when he went home, it says, “*Jesus advanced in wisdom and age and favor before God and man.*” What we have here is a genuine, and not out of character, childhood mishap.

When I was praying over these ideas on the Feast of the Holy Family last Friday, I couldn't help think of young Anthony. Talk about a kid who acted on impulse, who didn't think in terms of consequences, it was Anthony. And when Doug and Kristen described their son to me the other day, his energy, enthusiasm for whatever he was engaged in at the moment, I couldn't help but think of Jesus. Both were in character as immature boys, acting in a way totally consistent with what that means. Caught up in the moment, all the warnings Doug had given Anthony about being careful when playing were momentarily overwhelmed by whatever he was doing that led up to his accident.

Anthony no more intended to hurt himself than Jesus intended to upset Mary and Joseph. When tragedies like Anthony's accidental death happen, we don't have to look for someone to blame. There is no one or anything to blame, other than the fact that the world is filled with dangers, and sometimes we can get hurt.

Doug and Kristen, our hearts go out to you and to all your children, Alissa, Maria, Joseph, Sammy, Vincent, and even little Dominic, who will never have the joy of knowing his big brother Anthony. There is no way you could have prepared yourselves for Anthony's death, and nothing you could have done to stop it. In fact, there isn't anything anyone could have done to stop it, not our prayer or the wonders of medical science. We don't have words to take away your pain and feelings of loss. In one sense, we don't want to as they are a profound tribute to the love you have for Anthony. It's just not right that parents have to say goodbye to their children; and doubly not right that they have to do it twice. We can only taste a bit of what your sadness must be like. None of us can make sense of it all. That is why

Mary's response to the loss of Jesus in the temple is so important. *"She held all these things in her heart."*

When Jesus turned up missing, she had feared for his safety, and then marveled at what he was doing when found. She wondered how he could be so thoughtless and show such wisdom at the same time. It was to become her pattern as she watched her son grow up and begin his ministry. He said and did such wonderful things, and people hated him for it. She had to wonder. As a disciple herself, she believed him to be the savior and yet would weep for him at the foot of a cross. How could that be? She had to hold the tension of that apparent contradiction. Only in time would she realize that her son was Love incarnate, and that what love does is always filled with surprises. Mary knew that choosing to live the way of love, though filled with uncertainties, is the only way that makes sense, that gives life, that makes life worth living; that love alone could save the human race from itself.

You, as a family surrounded by people of faith, have chosen to follow the way of love as well, not because it takes away feelings of sadness and sorrow, but because it is the only thing that holds it all together; the only thing that gives you light in the midst of your darkness, the only thing that can empower you to hold the tensions of anguish and peace at the same time.

I want to say a few words to all of you children here today. While death is difficult to face and has the power to make the strongest among us cry, death is not something we need to fear. And the reason I can say this is not because it isn't powerful and mysterious, but because the message and life of the Jesus is even more powerful, and even more mysterious, but in a wonderful way. Remember, Jesus had to die, too. But that wasn't the end of the story. His tomb couldn't contain him. He overcame death. And he

promised that to us. He promised that to Anthony. It's okay to feel sad at what has happened, and to cry. Jesus cried at the death of his friend Lazarus. Tears come from somewhere deep inside of us to express the inexpressible, to proclaim a sorrow that is beyond words. It is mysterious, but life is even more mysterious and filled with greater wonder.

No, we have nothing to fear today, and there is no need to mask over or sugar coat such difficult things that happen in life.

The story is told of the little four year old girl who saw a picture puzzle for the first time. While some of the pieces had been assembled by her mother, she was fascinated with the other pieces and their array of color and odd shapes. The bright reds and yellows were her favorites, but she didn't like the dark pieces at all. So she decided to hide the black and dark purple pieces under a pillow in the couch. As her mother piece by piece worked the puzzle, the little girl found other dark pieces and hid them, too. In time the puzzle began to take shape. The little girl was amazed to see a beautiful picture gradually appear from all the little odd shaped pieces. She also noticed empty gaps in the picture. As it neared completion, her mother remarked, *"There must be some pieces missing."*

"I know where they are," the little girl said. *"I put them under the pillow in the couch because they weren't very pretty."* So her mother retrieved the pieces and filled all the empty gaps. Then she said to her daughter, *"The picture needs all the pieces to be complete. The dark ones are as necessary as the bright ones, for without them, the full beauty of the picture would be lost."*

Our lives are like that picture puzzle. They are made up of beautiful and not so beautiful pieces. But they are all necessary if we are to appreciate the complete picture of our lives. We cannot hide what we don't want to look at, for each piece of life's puzzle helps create the beauty of who we are. What happened to Anthony is no different. Like the rest of us, his life was

composed of bright and beautiful pieces, but his sudden death is a very dark piece that we'd rather not have to deal with.

I had the opportunity the other day to just listen to Doug and Kristen talk about their son Anthony. I could feel their deep love for him. They hadn't talked more than a minute and we were laughing. As we already said, he was energetic and gave himself 100% to whatever he was doing. His nickname was "Amps" as in turn up the amps, or turn up the energy, power, whatever (or turn it down). He was active, involved, with ADHD thrown in. Now, that could make for chaos. Anything could happen with Amps around. He was made up of bright, happy and joyful colors. Jokingly, Doug said Anthony was "a perfect baby," and then Kristen added, "*You noticed he said he was a perfect baby,*" emphasizing the *baby* part, and he was no longer a baby. But they loved him, as they love all their children, as they are. They wouldn't change anything, because that's who their children are, and they love them. Amps was quick and witty, a delightful child, and always smiling, with bright reds and yellows all throughout his personality.

While Anthony enjoyed Boy Scouts and sports like wrestling, he was also a thinker, and for Christmas asked for a Gift Card to Barnes and Noble. I'm sure his folks pondered this one in their hearts, as they had pondered the fact that it was when Kristen was carrying Anthony before he was born that her MS went into remission. How did that happen? Anthony's energy made him into a "mister fixer" in the family, and a planner. While Anthony took the loss of his sister Gloria hard, it also caught his imagination in a rather peculiar way. One day at a hockey game when his father gave one of Gloria's holy cards to a fan sitting with them, he said to his dad that they could make some money selling Gloria's holy cards. Doug was somewhat

surprised by the comment, and added, *“I suppose we could charge a nickel apiece.”* *“You can charge a nickel if you want,”* said Amps, *“but I was thinking more like ten dollars each.”* That was Anthony the budding entrepreneur.

There was richness and warmth to the colors of his life that came from his sheer goodness and his inner desire to learn and grow. He was happy, and there was no inkling that anything was wrong because there wasn't anything wrong. But then, out of nowhere, came that very dark piece of his life's puzzle that would forever influence how people would look at his portrait. His sudden death caught everyone off guard, and filled us with a sadness that cannot be expressed in words. That dark piece in his life also became a dark piece in ours.

And yet, in saying this, I can see that there was more to it than that. Have you ever noticed the hollow-gram on a credit card? When the light hits it a certain way, it looks dark and shadowy. But as you tilt the card, the light strikes it a new way, and it turns color, to shades of red and yellow, and you wonder how it happens. When Anthony was struggling for life in the hospital, I watched Doug bend low over his son and speak to him nose to nose. It was something special, just between them. When Doug closed his eyes, I know he was praying. In one sense, it was a dark moment, heart rending even. But then I saw something else in my mind's eye that seemed to change the color of the moment to shades of red and yellow. I realized that Doug was totally absorbed in love for his son. And that moment will be forever a part of Doug's portrait, a sad, dark piece to match that other piece placed there when Gloria died four years ago, but as the light of God's grace touched it, it, somehow revealed something beautiful about the mystery of life, and the source of life itself. Where love is God is. We wonder how this

can be, and ponder it in our hearts, as love again helps us hold the tension of such sadness and such joy at the same time.

No one ever said that following the way of Christian faith would be easy. In fact, I believe it is the most difficult journey of all, because, when it calls us to follow Jesus, it calls us to follow the way of love, and nothing is more difficult or demands more than that. It always leads to the cross. Today is a dark piece in the puzzle of our lives. It hurts so much only because it is made out of love. And when we think about it, we wouldn't want it any other way. I believe we are on this earth to learn how to love. And we are learning one of its tougher lessons today. While love gives us great joy and happiness most of the time, sometimes it hurts. Some of its lessons are difficult to learn, like this one.

As God loved Anthony into our lives, we now must offer him back to the One who is Love Itself. We will miss him, but that is okay because that is what love feels like in such circumstances. But we have nothing to fear, and neither does Amps. Shalom, peace. May you be welcomed by your dear sister Gloria whom you missed so much and so longed to see again. Thank you for being you. Shalom, peace, till that time when time is no more and we are all together again.