I’ve made more than a few mistakes in my life; one big mistake was responding to a good friends request that I learn to play golf with him on a Saturday morning. No matter what I did, no matter what I tried, no matter how much I watched and how hard I tried to imitate, it was hard to manage getting the swing just right. When I held the club too loosely, it flew right out of my hand… a failed golf shot. When I held the club **too tightly**, the muscles in my upper body were too constricted to allow the club to swing freely, to accomplish the work for which it was designed, … the result… a failed golf swing, just as surely as when my grip was **too loose.**”

“**Not too loose. Not too tight.**” Said my friend….Good swing thoughts next time **you** are on the course (because I won’t be there!).

**Not too loose, not too tight!**
Isn’t it the same with parenting? Parents continually try to find that right balance with their children; not holding them *too loosely*, allowing the children to spin wildly out of control without any direction and guidance; but also not holding on to them *too tightly*, and thus removing any chance that they will move smoothly through the cycles of life as they learn to try and to fail, to grow and to stumble, to fall down and then get up to try again.

Lets turn to Luke’s Gospel. He gives one of the few glimpses into the childhood of Jesus. When you think about it, our stories from the early life of Jesus and the Holy Family are very few. We have *this* story from Luke’s Gospel, narrating the presentation of infant Jesus at the Temple, just days or weeks after he was born. And the only other childhood snapshot is the next passage in Luke’s Gospel, when 12-year-old Jesus came back to the Temple with his family for the annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem. You remember that scene, when Mary and Joseph lost track of Jesus on the way home to Nazareth, and hurried back to the Temple to find pre-teen Jesus discussing theology with the
clergy. What can we learn from these two childhood glimpses into the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph?

From the first of these two stories we learn that the Holy Family did not hold Jesus too loosely. As you know, human babies are born supremely dependent on their parents for protection, for food, for shelter. Without adult care a baby would die within hours of birth. But wise parents provide more than just physical nutrition and protection to the children entrusted to their care. Thoughtful parents also tend to the spiritual and emotional needs of their children, with the same amount of discipline and commitment as they care for the physical needs. Today’s gospel shows us that Mary and Joseph named Jesus in accordance to the word of God mediated through the angel, and as soon as possible, they presented him in the Temple along with the best sacrifice they could afford. In their case, the sacrifice was a pair of doves, (which was the prescribed sacrifice for the poor, those who could not afford the more expensive sacrifices of a lamb or cattle). But no matter, this was a big gift for them, (which, by the way… is all God ever wanted for any of
us, or from any of us.) The sacrifice was meant to be an actual sacrifice, not just pocket change. The value of that gift would vary according to the financial ability of each person. It is no different today as we are called to give sacrificially to God, in gratitude and trust.

Mary and Joseph began, from the first day, to provide for, and guide, the spiritual direction for Jesus while he was in their home. Before he could talk or walk, they brought him to the Temple.

We celebrate baptism today, when the Church blesses not only the child, but the parents of that child reminding them (and their godparents) of their obligation to model faith for that child. One of the most powerful gestures that you as a community offer is the blessing of that child as he comes into the Church community. A simple sign, profound meaning: tracing the cross, promising that my life will support you… symbolically saying: we will go to God together…. Mary and Joseph brought him to the temple because they knew to thank God for him, and to ask God for help raising him to adulthood.
They knew one of their responsibilities and great joys was to raise children in the faith. Of course, they knew Jesus was a special child, but I imagine they would have done this with their child even if he had not been conceived by the Holy Spirit, and destined to be the Savior of the World.

How many times do we hear parents saying that when it comes to spiritual nurture and guidance of their children: “We don’t want to steer them when it comes to matters of faith and religion. We just want them to make up their own minds about that kind of thing when they are ready.” I wonder if these same parents would leave nutrition up to the child, and let them eat ice cream and candy all day instead of vegetables and fruit? The flame is pretty, I think I’ll put my hand in it…Would they allow their children to play in a crowded street, or hang out with friends who would corrupt their morals, just because they did not want to steer them or rob them of making up their own minds on those matters? Of course not! Matters of faith are no less important. We ruin a child if we hold them too loosely.
The next paragraph in Luke’s Gospel, tells the story of Jesus left behind at the Temple at age 12. We learn that the Holy Family did not hold him too tightly either. Although we did not read this passage today, I’m sure you remember it. The Holy Family went to Jerusalem at least once per year, as all Israelites were instructed to do. Imagine what an expense this must have been for a poor family, but they were committed to the faith and practice of Israel, both for the parents and the children. When Jesus was 12, Mary and Joseph were on the way back to Galilee before they realized that Jesus was not with the caravan that came from their village. You can imagine the fear and guilt that must have swept over Mary and Joseph when they realized this. (And by the way, for all of you parents who have left a child for a few hours at school, or at church, by mistake or forgetfulness or because you were distracted by work, you can ease up on yourself. You are not the first family to make that mistake!)
Of course they found the boy Jesus safe in the Temple, confounding the religious teachers with his uncanny grasp of mature and complex religious matters. What a testament he gave to the spiritual foundation that Mary and Joseph laid for him, but also what a testament to the unique relationship he had with his Heavenly Father. The point for us to realize here is that Mary and Joseph did not hover over his every moment. They did not keep Jesus tied to their hip, always in their sight. They gradually gave him space to grow up, to mature, to ask questions, to spread his wings. This is not an easy gift for parents to give their children. We are frightened by the violence and suffering in the world, from which we rightly want to protect our children. But don’t we also harm them when we try to bulldoze down every challenge in their path, and hover over them so closely that they fail to learn to stand and fall and get back up again. So today, let’s take a lesson or two from the Holy Family when it comes to parenting: **Not too loose; not too tight!**