
Family Dynamics

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam G. Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
The Second Sunday after Christmas - Year A

When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety. -Luke 2.48

Home Alone! Jesus was left behind like McCauley Caulkin at Christmas time! He was home alone, and his parents didn't know it!

No, the gospel for today is not like that old Christmas movie. The reason I love the Bible is because it describes ordinary life as I know it. The stories are real. The attitudes are real. The human characters have honor, but they also have flaws that I can relate to. In fact, scripture is its own proof. I do not need archaeology or science to prove the truth of the Bible. I know its truth already.

So it is in today's gospel. Luke, chapter two, contains the only biblical account of the childhood of Jesus that we have. Surely, somewhere along the line, you have wondered what Jesus' childhood was about?

Luke, chapter two, provides our only trusted answer. We do have other, non-canonical accounts of Jesus' childhood, but it is blatantly obvious why those accounts were not deemed worthy enough to include in the Bible. One story maintains that Jesus entertained his playmates with his miraculous powers. For instance, he would fashion a lump of his clay with his hand, and then toss the clay into the air. Voila! The clay would miraculously turn into a dove. His playmates loved it, so the story went.

Another account maintains that Jesus would occasionally become angry with his playmates. To spite them, he would strike his playmates down dead, and then raise them back to life again!

Really? Obviously, something about these stories strikes us as unnecessary and capricious. We do not worship a God who behaves that way, playing games with lumps of clay and tossing friend's lives to death and life again. Our God does not act that way.

No, we have only one story from the childhood of Jesus, and his adolescence. It is the story of Jesus being left behind in the Temple. This is a great story because it is truly real to us.

Every religious parent has asked the question. Would Jesus as a child have caused us as much trouble as my own child has? I believe the answer is Yes.

The story of Jesus as a boy in the temple is the story of a little boy left by mistake by his parents at the county fair! It is also the story of young man breaking free from his parents' control and exploring the world on his own. It is the only story we have of Jesus' childhood or adolescence; and we do not need another one.

When Jesus was naturally exploring the world beyond his parents' household and perspective, when Jesus was naturally growing older and going his own way, his own parents had trouble understanding that change and development.

I love their question to the boy Jesus when they have finally found him back at the temple in Jerusalem. They thought that he had obediently left when they left, just as he always had. They thought he would be with them the rest of their lives. But he had lingered. He was not just left behind. He had deliberately missed the caravan.

And their question to Jesus was not about his safety or about his curiosities. Their question was self-centered and personally limiting. "Why have you treated US this way?" was their question. To them, Jesus' actions was not about him. His actions were about them.

Every parent has similar tendencies. When our children misbehave, we feel somehow shamed. When our children do not find the right school, the right job, the right spouse, we somehow feel that we are the lesser.

Why have you treated us this way? This is the reaction of typical parents. And not just typical parents but typical people. Something unfortunate occurs. Even some tragedy occurs. Our tendency is to take it personally. Why have you treated us this way?

There comes a time in every family's life when adolescents naturally begin to spread their wings, they begin to explore the world, they begin to separate themselves from their parents.

Let me tell you, let me tell you from my own experience, this is not a comfortable time! What happened to sweet little Suzie and Little Joe? Why are they behaving so differently from us all of a sudden?

Somehow, it is satisfying to me that such was the case even in Jesus' own household. Like every teen-ager, even Jesus was misunderstood by his parents! Like many parents, even Jesus' parents took it personally when their son went missing. What was he doing to them?

Why has my son sullied my reputation? Why has my daughter made me look so bad?

After twelve years of toil and struggle, love and tears, we parents are accustomed to treating our dear children as if they belonged to only to us. Yes, we naturally begin to treat our children as property, as our own property, as extensions of our own lives. If they fail in the lessons of life, it is we who have failed in the lessons of life.

Again, we feel this naturally. After all, look at the time and money and energy we have poured into their lives!

But at some point or another, the truth invades our lives. Our children do not belong to us. Our children belong to Someone else.

"Did you not know" asked Jesus, "that I would be about my Father's business?" Imagine the dismay of Joseph and Mary when they heard those words. Oh, sure, they remembered the miraculous birth of Jesus. They remembered that they had prayed and prayed. They had turned the life of Jesus over to God himself.

They were like any good parents. They had turned the child over to God. But they did not expect to continue having to do that!

Their child was not their own. Their child was exploring his vocation and mission somewhere else.

Every child does this, whether or not we call them the Son of God. Every good and healthy child makes some sort of break with parents and develops another family.

And it always causes friction. This is why I believe the Scriptures. They describe reality. Jesus"" and Joseph and Mary"" went through the same system dynamics that we all go through. They went through friction.

But with that friction, even with that misunderstanding, growth occurs. Christian growth occurs! Follow that child. Follow that star! Trace that child back to the Temple. Hang with them. And they will increase; they will "increase in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor" (Luke 2.52).

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Sam Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

© *The Cathedral of St. Philip. All rights reserved.*