
The Problems of Parenting an Adolescent Messiah!

[Listen to the podcast.](#)

**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam 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*

Most parents will tell you that their child is special. "Oh sure, all children are nice. But, our child, well! Our child is really distinctive. Let me tell you about her." We smile and enjoy their pride.

But only until they cross the line. That line often occurs during the season of Christmas cards. I enjoy receiving cards with lots of tender photographs and joyous moments, and even the occasional Christmas family letter. In fact, thanks to each of you who sent me such cards and photographs and letters this year.

But I thank you even more that, this year, I did not receive a single family letter that crossed the line. You know that kind of letter. It is the type of Christmas letter that goes beyond the point of the child being special. Instead, the child is described as some kind of super-hero!

The super-hero Christmas letter describes *summa cum laude* children who are all varsity athlete super-stars and who just got full scholarships into the finest colleges in the country. Or they just got offered a job at a hundred thousand dollars a year or they just discovered a cure for cancer or won the lottery, or some other such amazing and enviable event.

Ha! Thanks for sharing. Your child, however, is not a super-hero. Super-heroes don't exist. And, your child is not the messiah. Again, I realize that most parents think our child is the messiah, at some point. We are fascinated by our children, and proud of them; they consume our time and resources. We love them!

But, then, at some point or another, our child begins to go her own way. I don't mean when he is two years old and saying "No" all the time. I mean when she is truly an adolescent and learning a mature identity.

Let me tell you what happened during the adolescence of the real messiah, Jesus. Let me tell you how his parents reacted when he began to search for his true identity.

The Bible actually includes only one story about Jesus during his youth. Only one. And it is the story we have in our gospel today, the story of Jesus being left in the temple.

Now, understand this: In the first and second centuries, AD, there were lots of other stories about the childhood of Jesus that did try to make him out to be a super-hero. You can read some of these stories in non-biblical sources, apocryphal literature, which competed in early Christianity for canonical authority. But there was a reason these other apocryphal

stories of Jesus did not make it into the Bible. They were super-hero stories! They were like obnoxious Christmas card letters!

Reading those stories, it is blatantly obvious why those accounts were not deemed worthy to include in the Bible. For instance, one story maintains that Jesus entertained his playmates with his miraculous powers. 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 and over the line. We do not worship a God who behaves that way, playing games with lumps of clay and tossing friends' lives to death and life again. Jesus does not act that way.

No, only one story about the youth of Jesus made it into the Bible, and it is a brilliant one. It is the story of Jesus being left behind in the Temple. This one episode captures wonderfully the plight of parents during their children's adolescence. It is a great story because it is a real story about adolescence; and it is not a super-hero story.

Let's examine this story. Let's start with a question that almost every religious parent might have asked. "Honestly, would Jesus as a child have caused me 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 a story we can relate to. First, its drama involves a possibility that every attentive parent fears: that maybe, accidentally, we might forget the child somewhere. Like Macaulay Culkin, being left behind alone at Christmas in the movie, *Home Alone*. Like a little boy left by mistake by his parents at the county fair.

But, secondly, we relate to this story because it is about a young man breaking free from his parents' control and exploring the world on his own. This is the only story we have of Jesus's childhood or adolescence; and we do not need another one.

It is heartening that Jesus was a true and ordinary adolescent. He was naturally exploring the world beyond his parents' household and perspective. And, just like us, when Jesus was naturally growing older and exploring his own way, his own parents had trouble understanding that change and development. The Bible says they were "searching" for him. How many of us have been "searching" for our young people when they are between twelve and twenty years old? Where are they?

When his parents finally found Jesus, their challenge to him is the question that rings through every family with adolescents. They thought that he had obediently departed when they had departed, 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 forgotten. He seems to have deliberately missed the caravan.

And so they repeat the words that every parent has exclaimed, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety! (Luke 2:48)"

Their question to Jesus is 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's actions were 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 typically self-absorbed 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? I doubt that any of us is immune to that reaction.

But, there comes a time in every family's life when adolescents naturally begin to spread their wings, they begin to explore

the world, and they begin to separate themselves from their parents. I can 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 teenager, 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 embarrassed me? 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 appears in 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, again and again!

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, or the messiah, or a super-hero. 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 continue to believe the Bible. The stories of scripture describe reality; Jesus ""and Joseph and Mary""went through the same family system dynamics that we all go through. They went through friction. But with that friction, even with that misunderstanding, growth occurs. Christian growth occurs!

The Gospel of Luke concludes the story with an odd word, the word, "obedient." Jesus did finally leave with Mary and Joseph and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them (Luke 2:51)." It's as if the biblical writers want to claim that, yes, Jesus was a good boy after that.

But I believe something wonderful and wise and mature happened to Jesus in that event. Jesus learned who he was. He realized his true identity. And that mature realization gave him the ability to be obedient in a wise and mature way. For, it is one thing to be obedient when we are children, not knowing any better. It is another thing to be obedient when we know who we are. True obedience occurs in life when we know how to go our own way, when we have been given the freedom to live into our identity.

Jesus was fully human. He experienced adolescence and growth just as we do, and his parents went through the same thing as the parents of all adolescent messiahs do. But they made it through. Even with the anxiety and confusion of growing up, God loves that growth. So it is, that Jesus "increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor" (Luke 2.52).

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia