
Family Dynamics in the Adolescence of Jesus

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Christmas 2 – Year C

When his parents saw Jesus 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

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

The gospel lesson that we hear today, for the Second Sunday after Christmas, is one of my favorites. I love the Bible because it so extraordinarily 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. Scripture is its own proof. I do not need archaeology or science to prove the truth of the Bible. I recognize its truth when I read it.

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, after you have celebrated Christmas, 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 to include in the Bible. For instance, one omitted 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 non-canonical 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—and adolescence—of Jesus. It is the story of Jesus being left behind in the Temple. This is a great story because it is truly real to us.

Many a religious parent, somewhere along the way, has asked the question, "Would Jesus as a child have caused me as much trouble as my own child has?" Well, this story indicates that the answer is Yes.

On one level, sure, 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! But the story is much deeper than that. More critically for us, this is also the story of a 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.

Jesus was behaving much like every healthy adolescent that I know of. He was naturally exploring the world beyond his parents' household and perspective; he was naturally growing older and going his own way, and—lo and behold!—his own parents have trouble understanding that change and development. They were astonished and dismayed.

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 about themselves, 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 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? We are dismayed.

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 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 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 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.

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 Mary and Joseph when they heard those words. Oh, sure, they remembered the miraculous birth of Jesus. (It was only ten days ago!) 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 causes friction. This is why I believe the Bible. The Scriptures describe reality! Jesus—and Joseph and Mary—went through the same family system dynamics that we all go through. They were astonished, Scripture says! They were also dismayed. Our children's growth can be astonishing, or dismaying.

Ah, let us follow the astonishment! Let us follow the astonishment of Mary and Joseph, and not their dismay. The growth of a child is beautifully astonishing. Because Jesus grew in wisdom, our own children grow in wisdom, too. Let that child go. Let your child follow her star! Trace that child back to the Temple. Hang with them where they are. 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 Samuel G. Candler

Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

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