
Child, Why Have You Treated Us Like This?

**A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Christmas 2 – 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

Child, why have you treated us like this? Why have you done this to us? What has happened to that little boy we were singing about just two weeks ago at Christmas?

Do you remember that lovely Christmas carol? We probably remember mostly the first verse, "Once in royal David's city..." But do we remember the third verse? It goes like this:

*And through all
His wondrous childhood,
He would honor and obey,
Love and watch the lowly mother,
In whose gentle arms He lay.
Christian children all should be,
Mild, obedient, good as He.*

Really? Jesus, "through all his wondrous childhood would honor and obey and love and watch his lowly mother?" Should Christian children all be "mild, obedient, good as He?"

Today gives us a chance to consider the childhood and youth of Jesus. 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.

Oh, there were other stories of Jesus as youth that did not make it into the Bible, silly ones mostly. One story had him fashioning a lump of clay with his hand, tossing the clay into the air, and magically having the clay turn into a dove. His friends loved it, so the story went. Another story maintains that Jesus would occasionally become angry with his playmates. To spite them, he would strike them down dead, and then raise them back to life again!

It's good that those stories didn't make it. They tried to make him out to be some sort of comic book super-hero. They were stories like the ones we read about today on some of the more obnoxious Christmas card letters, parents bragging about how superlative their own children are!

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 brilliantly 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.

People may ask, "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 our child somewhere. Like Macaulay Culkin in the movie, being left *Home Alone* at Christmas. Like a little boy left by mistake by his parents at the

county fair.

But, secondly, we relate to this story because it tells of 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 should be 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, as 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 find 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 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'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, when they begin to explore the world, when 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 Mary and Little Joe? Why are they behaving so differently from us all of a sudden? Someone wise told me once, that, as a child, your sweet little child is a loving, adorable dog, eager for you, loving and licking you. Then, when adolescence develops, they turn into a cat!

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.

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.

Again, we feel this naturally. 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. But having raised him, they now realized 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, 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 usually causes friction. The Bible speaks truth here! Jesus – and Joseph and Mary—went through the same family system dynamics that we all go through. They went through friction. The miracle is that with that friction, even with that misunderstanding, growth occurs. Christian growth occurs!

Strangely, the Gospel of Luke does conclude the story with that word, "obedient" again. Luke says that Jesus did finally leave with Mary and Joseph and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them (Luke 2:51). Wow. 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 temple event. Jesus was learning who he was. He was realizing his true identity, like we hope every young person does. 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 in life occurs when we have learned 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 things as the parents of all adolescent messiahs do. But they made it through. And we will, too. Even with the anxiety and confusion of growing up, God loves that growth. Only then does Jesus increase "in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor." (Luke 2:52)

AMEN.

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