

**October 11, 2020**

**Raising Resilient Kids**

**Searching for Hope in Turbulent Times**

**Luke 2:41-52**

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When I was in middle school, Elder Jackson and Ellery Peterson, a retired pastor and the mayor of my hometown, often found me in the hallway outside the sanctuary on Sunday mornings. It wasn't a scheduled meeting. It just seemed to happen. Elder and Ellery were well into their 70s, or so it seemed. Each week, we would talk for a few minutes, they took interest in the things I was interested in. They shared bits of wisdom or something that was happening with their grandkids, and they would offer their encouragement when things weren't going well. It was never a long conversation, but it made an impression. In those few minutes a week, I felt seen and heard by people who had no real need to see or hear me, but did anyway. These two men gave me a sense that who I was - in all my adolescent awkwardness - mattered.

I wonder if that's a bit how Jesus felt when he decided to ditch his parents and hang back in the Temple after the Passover festival? For a week, he and the whole Jewish community gathered to remember with feasting and ceremony how God delivered their people from slavery in Egypt and led them to the Promised Land. Maybe amid the festivities some of those rabbis and leaders bumped into the young Jesus by the portico outside the Temple. Maybe they took a few minutes to listen to him in all his adolescent

awkwardness too? As the Temple leaders listened to this young Jesus, it became clear that he had a profound sense of God's power and wisdom. And though they may not have had a lot of incentive to pay any attention to him at first, they soon learned that perhaps there was even something for them in paying attention to this young man.

In Jesus' day, twelve-year olds were finishing their basic education. They had learned to memorize the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. From there, boys would decide to learn a trade from a family member or go on to more schooling. If they chose more schooling they would find a rabbi to follow. They would memorize more Scripture and be trained in the interpretive style of that particular rabbi. It would be no surprise if the rabbis Jesus found in the Temple were eager to be his teacher, after those first few conversations. If Jesus chose them they would have an important role in giving Jesus the skills and knowledge he needed to fulfill God's calling his life. And it wouldn't surprise me if Jesus had been eager to receive such attention from these religious leaders.

Kids haven't changed much in a couple millennia. As children become adolescents, they crave attention from adults outside their families. These expanded influences help young people develop the skills and resilience they need to become adults, particularly when those influences are positive and life-giving. They need peers, coaches, teachers, members of their faith community, and

popular media to figure out more about who they are in this big wide world. Whether it is in ancient Israel or today in Rochester, kids need people in their lives who see and hear them for who they are, right now.

As a faith community, we have a calling to pay attention to our young people, to help shape their identity and hear God's call in their lives. A mentor of mine in college called these people AAA adults. They are Authentic, Affirming, and Available. And I'm not just talking about professionals, this is our call as the church. This is your calling.

It may be more difficult in a time of pandemic to be this kind of adult in the life of a young person, but it may be more important than ever to try - both for their sake and for yours. Kids are facing some of the worst mental health outcomes ever. I read not long ago that the average teenager's level of stress and depression is equal to those who were institutionalized in the 1960s. These are turbulent times, pandemic or not, and kids are feeling the effects of separation along with all the rest of us. Finding ways to listen to a younger person, be it a niece or nephew, a grandchild, a neighbor kid, or someone you know from church can be a life line of connection and resilience that that 15 year old you know may desperately need.

This stage of life can be a bit scary for parents too. Watching kids grow up to test the bounds of everything we have taught them, to watch them make dumb decisions is a powerless feeling.

Just imagine how Mary and Joseph felt scouring Jerusalem for three long days before they found their son. I'm not sure that the NRSV Bible accurately captured that moment when Mary found Jesus and said, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been searching for you with great anxiety!" Maybe you don't have to imagine this scene because you've lived it, either as a youth or a parent. I wonder if Mary and Joseph's anxiety came more from the sense that they were watching their little boy grow up, than from the fact that he hung back with the rabbis for three days. Perhaps their anxiety stemmed from realizing that even if the miracles around their son's birth had waned, that Jesus was indeed destined for a calling that would challenge all their family's norms. Perhaps they were just hoping to hold on to their son a little while longer before they had to give their son Jesus back to God.

Perhaps as parents and adults who care for kids that is our anxiety too? That the time comes too quickly for us to give our children to God and the world. We want to hold on, but we can't. It won't help us, and it won't help our kids. For most parents of adolescents letting go is a process. And it should be. We hope our kids make good choices with friends, but sometimes they don't. We pray that

their teachers and coaches will guide them well. We hope that they follow musicians, movie stars, or professional athletes that reflect at least some of our values, but they won't always. I thank God that my 12- year-old daughter isn't following Kim Kardashian on Instagram or anything like that, but I imagine the time will come when there will be some version of that which we'll have to talk about.

In her book, *The Blessing of a B Minus*, Jewish adolescent psychologist Wendy Mogel writes, "I found guidelines that have helped me keep the faith as our teens cross the narrow bridge to adulthood. Accepting your teen doesn't mean you should be indulgent or lax or permissive. It does mean that you understand both their strengths and limitations, their quirks and their awkward, two-steps-forward, one-step-back growth. It also means you respect your teen's instinct to separate from you, and that even in their most foolhardy, rebellious moments you find something to cherish."

Someone once told me that raising children is like building a kite. For the first several years you are tasked with taking beautiful, complex, and fragile pieces and assembling them into something that is both beautiful and has the strength to thrive in the wind. As children reach adolescence, most of the pieces are assembled, and it's time to start letting out the string to see how they fly. At first you keep the kite close, making sure the string stays taut,

reassuring the kite that it won't crash too hard if there's not enough wind or the winds are too strong. But if you keep the kite too close for too long, it will not do what it's meant to do.

Now the thing about kites and kids is that they are going to crash. They're going to get dinged up. Sometimes badly. Thankfully, we belong to a God who knows this about all of us. A God whose grace, shown through the love of family and faith and community can help our kids get back up and try again. We belong to a God who lived and moved and was among us in Jesus so that we may have God's strength when the winds of life knock us down. This is the same God who calls us to be those AAA adults who are on the lookout for signs that a kid is down, or that a parent could use some reinforcements. God may be working in you to help a young person find the wind again so that they can do what God is calling them to do.

I don't remember a single word Ellery and Elder told me some 25 years ago. But I know they cared. I know they encouraged. I know to this very day that God was at work in them, because they showed up in that hallway most Sundays. Whether they knew it or not, they showed up during the most turbulent time of my family's life. And they gave me hope. And kids can't have resilience without hope.

Whether you are 12 or 42 or 92, I'd like you to think of who those AAA adults have been in your young life. Consider what young person God may be calling you to really see and hear? What parent may need you to accompany them as they guide their precious kites into the wind? Friends, this is the church's work. And as difficult as it is to do in these days of pandemic, it may never be more important. Amen.