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December 30

“An Open Letter to my Teenage Son”

Luke 2:41-52; Proverbs 2 – The Value of Wisdom

Cade, this reflection is written to you but I suspect it may say some things to all of us.

Dear Cade -

Mary had a teenage son once. His name was Jesus. Though we are amazed that Jesus came into this world as a baby – it is also amazing that he passed through all the ages and stages of childhood, and yet it is this one particular story about Jesus’ youth, that happened quite close to your age, that has survived to be passed down from generation to generation of faithful believers. It is the only biblical story about Jesus that falls between Jesus the baby and Jesus the 30 year old traveling rabbi.

Jesus and his family go on a holiday vacation to Jerusalem for Passover. It’s not all that unusual a situation. We just came back from the holiday gatherings in West Virginia and Maryland. We saw multiple family members – grandparents, great-grandmothers, cousins, aunts and uncles. Our family is small enough that getting lost from your parents among your other relatives might be difficult – but I bet you can imagine that with a larger family or multiple families traveling together – a trusted teenage (or pre-teen) boy might be expected to simply follow the herd. That’s what Mary and Joseph thought. However, it was nightfall, after a full day’s traveling before they realized that their son wasn’t with the group. They had to return to Jerusalem to look for him.

I understand completely Mary's anger and anxiety that is recorded in the telling of this event. It took them 3 days to find Jesus, their first-born son who was promised to them in such a way that you don't just leave him behind. I remember bringing you home from the hospital in the snow and ice. Parents tell lots of stories about their babies first days, and then they repeat all the stories that bring either great fear or great joy. This is a story like that. So know that if you ever get lost for a few days, I would be an absolute wreck. But now in the age of instant communication, there's no excuse for not receiving a phone call or text!

Perhaps that's why this story also remains part of the history of our faith. We can imagine the absolute panic of losing a child who is a part of the family. We understand Mary and Joseph's fear for Jesus' fate and their joy at finding him again. And yet, after a few deep breaths, there's a deeper level to this tale that is important for us all to hear. We can also imagine Jesus' side of the story, what it would be like to be so engrossed in an important and beloved activity as a young person to "forget" to join the family caravan. That's the part I really want to get to today. It's not the edge to Mary's voice that is the crucial piece of this story. This is not a story to tell children to make them afraid of getting lost or disobeying their parents. Ultimately this is a tale about being obedient to the higher calling of fulfillment and growth into one's own skin.

Ultimately, Dad and I know that we won't keep you home forever. We don't want to. It isn't possible for us to always keep you safe, and it isn't our job to house and feed you for the rest of your life. Your life is yours to live, not ours. There will come a time for you to leave the parental nest and try things on your own without a word of advice from either of us. It won't be easy, but we will try to learn how to shut up about telling you what you should or shouldn't do. The same will be true several years later for your sister. It's an ongoing process. What you can be expected to do at age 5 or at 13 or at 27 or at 42 are all very different. For those, like us, who raise beloved

sons and daughters it isn't always easy to let go. You've even seen our parents, your grandparents, doling out plenty of advice about our lives now. It is a hard habit to break – but trust us – we understand the need to give you the space to be who you will grow up to be.

Though he scared the living daylights out of his parents by not showing up, Jesus somehow understood this need to follow his calling as something even greater than meeting his parents' expectations for the family trip. This is dangerous advice I know, but sometimes you will have to break the rules or not care so much about other people's expectations of you in order to be true to yourself. It's probably at this point that I should also remind you that you're not Jesus!

Anyway, Jesus left the family herd to learn wisdom among the teachers at the temple. You will learn a great deal from people who are not your parents, at least I hope so. You will be richer for it. Ask lots and lots of questions – like Jesus did. Don't be afraid to share your own answers – Jesus wasn't. When you are true to your heart, and ready to learn, the teachers will be there, and then eventually you will count yourself among those who have important knowledge and understanding to share. You will find your own place and purpose in God's house which has room for many, many ways and styles of being in this world.

After all the anxiety dissipated, Mary was able to catch her breath and ponder all these things in her heart about her son. He didn't just leave the family bus for no good reason; he was learning how to lead the whole nation to a new sense of freedom and trust in God. Sometimes our children surprise us and amaze us. Sometimes we have to let them grow beyond us in knowledge and understanding, and for some parents that alone is frightening.

However, all the great spiritual leaders confirm that although spiritual growth is something that happens in community, individually we can only be responsible for ourselves, not for another person. Thomas Merton puts it this way. He says:

Although humans have a common destiny, each individual has to work out his own personal salvation in fear and trembling. We can help one another to find out the meaning of life, no doubt. But in the last analysis the individual person is responsible for living his own life and for 'finding himself.' If he persists in shifting this responsibility to somebody else, he fails to find out the meaning of his own existence.

You cannot tell me who I am, and I cannot tell you who you are. If you do not know your own identity, who is going to identify you? Others can give you a name or a number, but they can never tell you who you really are. That is something you yourself can only discover from within.

(Source: *Prologue to No Man Is an Island*)

Jesus was well aware, even at twelve or thirteen, that he had a spiritual destiny to fulfill. He was lucky enough to be born to parents chosen by God to nurture him toward that destiny – but they were not enough. He would have to learn wisdom from his teachers. He would have to gain knowledge from being a keen student of people and their relationships with one another.

Eventually he would gather together men and women who would learn from him and with him to build a new understanding of God's parental love that would not be oppressive but that would set us all free. Salvation is not something to be feared, but being saved means being free enough to become all God has in mind for us. That can be scary and very real. I don't always want to put myself in the place of trusting God. It may make me unpopular or not liked, or it may put me in a

situation where I must choose the adventure over the safe path. That happens a lot. God's people are called to be inventive, creative, and adventuresome. Are you ready for that? Jesus wouldn't even let the teachers of the faith get stuck in their own opinions. He changed their minds – at twelve years old.

As a spiritual leader in God's church, I am not just a parent, but a teacher. If I only talk about following the rules and staying on the straight and narrow, I'm not fully doing my job. You are old enough now to begin to see how the rules don't always give us the right direction, and to notice how the tradition may become a burden rather than a blessing. You are ready for the challenges of living into your own spiritual destiny – perhaps not alone – but with the beloved community to guide and teach you – and to allow your voice to be heard.

Jesus did not let the rules of the Sabbath get in the way of his guiding principles. He had two and the rest of his understanding flowed from those two touch points. He taught that we are to love God fully, with every ounce of our being and we are to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Those are two very simple, simple sayings, and yet they may be the hardest things we have to do on a daily basis. Jesus was also a wisdom teacher not unlike Woman Wisdom in the book of Proverbs. Neither one teaches based on a strict set of rules, but on an understanding about life. Seek the truth. Care for others. Walk in the ways of the good, keep to the paths of the just. Again simple, but difficult. This is the life lived in faith.

I trust that you will indeed find your own path, your spiritual destiny, your place in the world as God will show it to you. It's exciting as a parent to be watching it unfold as you get older. But do know that parents ponder these things. Those who will be your teachers will learn from you as well as show you the way – and by this I don't mean just teachers at school – I mean all those

people you encounter who have something to offer to you about what life is all about. There will be the spiritual community around you everywhere.

Indeed, yesterday, as I was going through my Facebook feed, a quote from Lady Gaga made spiritual sense. She has said, "Don't you ever let a soul in the world tell you that you can't be exactly who you are." Sounds a little like Thomas Merton and Jesus to me.

God has great plans for you. God has great plans for each of us. Listen to the wisdom of the ages and of right now. Ponder your own life and enjoy learning about the lives of others. You are loved. Not just by me, but by many, and by God. Amen.

(Proverbs 2) My child, if you accept my words and treasure up my commandments within you, 2 making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding; 3 if you indeed cry out for insight, and raise your voice for understanding; 4 if you seek it like silver, and search for it as for hidden treasures-- 5 then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. 6 For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding; 7 he stores up sound wisdom for the upright; he is a shield to those who walk blamelessly, 8 guarding the paths of justice and preserving the way of his faithful ones. 9 Then you will understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path; 10 for wisdom will come into your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul; 11 prudence will watch over you; and understanding will guard you. 12 It will save you from the way of evil, from those who speak perversely, 13 who forsake the paths of uprightness to walk in the ways of darkness, 14 who rejoice in doing evil and delight in the perverseness of evil; 15 those whose paths are crooked, and who are devious in their ways.

20 Therefore walk in the way of the good, and keep to the paths of the just. 21 For the upright will abide in the land, and the innocent will remain in it; 22 but the wicked will be cut off from the land, and the treacherous will be rooted out of it.