

This is our 2nd in a 5-part series called “The Rhythm of Life.” The goal of the series is to reflect on some of the growth challenges we face at each phase of our lives, and to see how scripture provides insights, wisdom, and counsel that can help us navigate life at every stage. Last week we focused on the first phase, childhood, and I shared about DCP, a parent education program, which I enrolled in when our oldest son was 18-months old. DCP stands for “Developing Capable People.” In the DCP model the primary goal of parenting is to equip a child with the perceptions and skills they’ll eventually need as an adult. The idea is that successful parenting “Begins with the end in mind.”

Based on that standard, Christina and Mark Rotando failed to do this with their 30-year-old son, Michael. I would guess many of you saw this news story. On May 23, a New York judge issued an ejection order, directing that Michael leave his parent’s home. Michael’s parents’ initiated court proceedings to evict their 30-year-old son after they’d begun, in February, to give him notice that they expected him to move out; notices which seemed to Michael ignore.

I watched a news anchor interview Michael Rotando after the verdict. From my perspective, as someone with a background in juvenile probation, child protective services, and youth ministry, his behaviors and statements reminded me of someone stuck in early adolescence. I say ‘early adolescence’ because our confirmands this morning all display a greater level of maturity and reflectiveness than what I witnessed in the interview!

The term ‘adolescence’ describes the phase of life that falls between childhood and adulthood, but the length of this adolescent period has become murky. In earlier times, and in many primitive tribes, there was no such thing as adolescence. When the time was right, a child who was one day playing with friends and under the control of their parents, would undergo a ritual of initiation, usually between the ages of 12-14. For females it was more biologically driven, while for males it was usually a solitary ritual. After this ritual, the child was considered an adult. This was certainly how things worked in the time of David, who would eventually be the king of Israel, and in the time of Jesus.

In modern times, and especially in our Western culture, the period of adolescence keeps getting longer. Where we once made an immediate jump

from childhood to adulthood, we now subdivide the phases of adolescence into at least three categories - - early, middle, and late adolescence – spanning a period which begins around the age of 11 or 12, and which can extend well into the mid-20’s.

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In his book, *Stages*, written back in 1977, the Rev. John Claypool outlined what he considered to be the growth challenge of the adolescent phase. For parents of an adolescent, the challenge is to ‘let up without letting go’. For the adolescent, the challenge is to ‘walk forward without walking away.’ Let me repeat that: For parents the challenge is to ‘let up without letting go’. For the adolescent, the challenge is to ‘walk forward without walking away.’ Both of these challenges are noted, at least metaphorically, in this morning’s gospel reading from Luke 2:41-52, read for us by Lexi Testa, a high school junior involved in our St. Paul’s youth ministry program.

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This is the only story in Scripture which tell us about Jesus’ life inbetween his birth and his launch into ministry as an adult! This story would be unknown to us if we only had the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and John, because none of them shares the story Luke tells us in this passage! This vignette of Jesus’ young life offers three insights into his adolescent relationship with God, things we, the church, need to pay close attention to if we want to help our youth walk forward, without walking away.

First, we know from this story, that Jesus was nurtured in the context of obedience and worship with his parents and other adults. That’s why he was in Jerusalem in the first place. Because his parents took him there. Second, at age 12, there were stirrings within Jesus of his unique connection to God. Third, Jesus’ relationship with God clearly caused his family some discomfort and anxiety. I want to unpack these three observations and what they mean for our ministry to children and youth.

First, as a church, it tells us that we need to create opportunities for substantive interactions between youth and adults. I loved being a “professional youth minister,” but youth ministry, as it’s been carried out in the past few decades, has done a poor job of connecting youth to their church family. We know this because research tells us that only 1 out of every 7 teens raised in the church comes back to church when they reach adulthood! (What’s that

proverb? “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again expecting a different result.” We’ve been doing specialized youth ministry the same way for decades now, and the results aren’t validating...)

Mark DeVries, in his book *Family Based Youth Ministries*, calls it the “one-eared Mickey Mouse” dynamic. There is the church ministry (for adults), and then we have a youth ministry that is separate and distinct. The point of contact between them is the youth minister and/or a couple volunteers; volunteers who may or may not have established a mature life of discipleship themselves. In practice, this means that students get less and less connected to the core practices and rituals of the church, and they rarely interact with adult disciples who they can observe practicing an adult faith!

Contrast that with the 12-year-old Jesus, who was welcomed to sit down and talk with adults about God! In Jesus' time, it would not have been unusual for a child, about to reach his bar Mitzvah, to be asking and answering questions in a temple or synagogue. An intergenerational exchange was part of the fabric of the culture and religion. Because that is how a 12-year-old made the transition from to adulthood! Jesus was nourished in an environment where he learned to know God through practicing the rituals of his parents and talking with other adults.

The second thing to notice, briefly, is this: As the elders in the temple did, we need to pay attention to how God is stirring in the lives of our adolescents. And we need to affirm their presence and encourage their questioning. Indeed, we need to help them with their questioning! Notice that the teachers in the temple not only welcomed Jesus to their conversation, they value his insights and they honored his giftedness.

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Finally, notice that Jesus’ relationship with God caused discomfort within his family. Mary and Joseph are really perplexed! This remains true, but in a different way, for modern families. Any youth minister will tell you that the teenage years are those when they are most open to exploring their spiritual lives, but life often gets in the way of that exploration by the push for our youth to get good grades, to play sports, to get part-time jobs, to be involved in scouting or band or drama, or chess club, or...

These are all really good things! But I lament how all of these good things are not balanced with a similar effort to ensure that we intentionally and creatively helping our youth connect more deeply to their spiritual development and practices of mature faith. And so, when our children are very young, parents need consider how they will help shape their lives so that church involvement doesn’t slip to last place on the family priority list. If you think my own children never put up resistance to coming to church, you’d be wrong. If you think we ever had a fight about it, you’re also wrong... We had several strategies of encouragement that we’ve used with all 3 of our kids, not to force them to attend, or to force them to believe, but to encourage their involvement and connection the family of faith.

As a church, as parents, if we want to nourish the spiritual lives and faith development of our youth, we need to begin with the end in mind. If the end goal is that our children and youth disassociate from church, we need not change our way of doing youth ministry. If, on the other hand, the end is to help our children, as Luke 2:51 suggests: to ‘increase in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor’, then maybe we’ll look at reshaping our home lives, and our youth ministry, in ways that provide for regular and substantive interactions between our youth and adults who are modeling lives of vital discipleship.

Amen.