

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“THE FAMILY: CHILDREN AND PARENTS”
Luke 2:22-40
December 28, 2008
8:45 & 11:00 A.M. Services**

Both the breakdown and the building up of society begin at the same place. The home is the most important site of social collapse and social renewal. No institution can rival the family, because the family actually creates and nurtures human life.

The parents of Jesus were attentive to their religious obligations. We are told that the child grew in size and in strength, and was filled with the wisdom and grace of God. This would not have happened, however, had Mary and Joseph not met their parental responsibilities.

In recent years the family has gone through a great many changes. The typical American family of the mid-twentieth century is decidedly less typical today, as family structures take new and varied forms. The family, however, is still the most powerful and important institution in society and needs support from all sides.

The world has two primary images of Jesus. During the Christmas season we think of him as a baby, the Christmas child of Bethlehem. The rest of the time we think of him as an adult. The silent years of Jesus are frustrating to us. How we would love to watch Jesus grow, as a child into a youth and on into adulthood. What we know of Jesus' visit to Jerusalem at age twelve only makes us want to know more. Perhaps we could understand him better if we were permitted to watch him grow. And what kind of relationship did the growing Jesus have with Mary and Joseph? Parenting at best is hard work. Can you imagine having the assignment of raising Jesus?

A tiny window into the growing Jesus is located at the end of Luke 2: ***“And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.”*** This means that Jesus grew as we all grow. He is our human brother and experienced physical growth as we do. This does not go without saying. No child’s physical growth should be taken for granted. The greatest heartache to strike many families is the failure of a child’s body to grow normally. Jesus grew up physically, normally, according to the Creator’s plan. The centuries have speculated about Jesus’ physical appearance. What did he look like? Short or tall? Attractive or ordinary? Lacking reliable evidence, we assume there was nothing physically extraordinary about him. He shared our human physicality. He was one of us in his growing.

When he was a boy, Jesus was a real boy. He was not a man, or a full-grown Messiah, in a boy’s body. His parents were wise to let their child be a child. They seemed most concerned when he did things not typical of children, such as the incident in the temple at twelve. There are no signs that they were hoping for an exceptional child. They provided him a normal family environment to develop physically and emotionally. Jesus’ bonds of love and trust with his parents prepared him for a lifetime of trusting in God. If the child is father of the man, Jesus’ childhood must have been fundamentally healthy and nurturing. The adult Jesus gives no evidence of mistreatment or deprivation in childhood, no regrettable learned behavior, no distorted sense of things. Jesus’ physical growth was enhanced by his work with his carpenter father. Carpentry is not child’s play, and we can assume Jesus was robust, agile, and strong. Jesus grew normally. He grew in the natural world like a tree on a river bank, rooted in the earth, reaching for the sky.

Some of the same people who wonder about Jesus’ appearance may also wonder about his I. Q. Here, too, there is no way to know, and it does matter. He did not come to be the world’s savant but its Savior. Watching him grow in wisdom must have brought the same kind of joy to his parents that came from watching him grow physically. They watched him discover the world of nature. They observed him pondering life’s mysteries. They saw him embrace new experiences and learn from painful risks. They watched him grow in wisdom.

Wisdom, biblically, has ultimately to do with God. For Jesus, to grow in wisdom meant growing in his knowledge of God. This is the point beyond

which parents and friends cannot go. This is not true of Jesus only. This is the point beyond which we must all go alone. Again, the final product is the best evidence of how Jesus grew in his knowledge of God. He became a God-obsessed man. Those who attribute to him no divinity or supernatural status whatsoever will call him the most God-like human who ever lived.

Our biblical ancestors prized wisdom as part of God's own essence. They had no confusion such as ours, about the differences between intelligence, knowledge, and wisdom. Wisdom was less speculative and more practical, less measurable information and more common sense, less theoretically cold and more life-affirming warm. Wisdom was about how to live and how to serve God. Jesus grew in wisdom, as should every child.

Our children belong to God more than to us. Appropriate parenting is a redemptive process of giving children back to God, from whom they come. From birth onward the process of growth is away from us. This is not to minimize the role of parents and families. The trauma of birth is our first religious crisis. If in that trauma the little self finds love and security, this is his or her first experience of God, because God is love. Lewis Sherrill wrote that **“the emotional life of the individual as infant and child determines the kind of religion which he can respond to and make his own.”** There are no perfect parents, and ultimately our children will seek their own way. If we genuinely love them, this will cover a multitude of parental sins and errors.

Mary and Joseph did not raise Jesus. God raised Jesus. Mary and Joseph provided the environment in which this took place. Human growth takes place only in relationships. We are made for communion, not isolation. Among the very first things we see is another face. Our first impressions are of human touches and caresses. The entire process of human growth is interactive and relational. We find our own unique identities through others. We are led by others to discover the world around us. Our first understandings of reality are given by others. But the end result tells the whole story. Jesus was guided throughout his life by God's presence and purpose. He increasingly recognized both his identity and his destiny in God. Jesus grew in God, from the beginning to the end. He stands for the world to see as the only one of us who is both fully human and fully divine. He is all of God that can be contained in a human life. No mere human could raise this child. At the first, as at the last, God raised Jesus. The best thing we can do for our children is to love them and give them back to God.

Families seem like the most natural thing in the world. We are born into them and live in them for years without questioning what our family believes or how it behaves. But good families are made, not born. They are made by working hard at learning patience, bestowing love, taking care, offering forgiveness, sharing sorrow. There is no greater achievement in life than learning to live as a family. That's why our college students are home for the holidays.