

The background of the entire page is a photograph of the interior of Antelope Canyon. The image shows the smooth, undulating walls of the slot canyon, which are illuminated by warm, golden-orange light filtering through a narrow opening on the left. The light creates a strong contrast between the brightly lit areas and the deep shadows of the canyon's recesses. The rock surfaces have a visible horizontal striation, suggesting sedimentary layers.

GROWING YOUNG

Fueling a Warm Community

FUELING A WARM COMMUNITY

The following general sermon outline can be adapted as needed to match your own context, teaching style, and theological nuance based on your tradition. We hope it is a starting point for a sermon that is infused with the type of language you would normally use.

Main Idea:

Young people—and all of us—need a church that is a warm, welcoming, and authentic home. Jesus found such a community as a 12-year-old boy temporarily separated from his parents.

Scripture:

Primary: Luke 2:41-52

Supplemental: Romans 12:5

Opening:

Share a story of a time you were lost as a child—in a crowd, at a store, riding your bike, whatever may evoke feelings of fear and uncertainty from being separated from your family/caregivers.

The feeling of being alone stands in stark contrast to Jesus' experience in Luke 2:41-52.

Scripture Teaching:

Explore the following points regarding this text:

- This is the only account of Jesus as a child or preteen in Scripture—and his parents lose him! (Feel free to have some fun with Mary and Joseph's predicament at losing God.)
- It was important for Jesus to visit the temple in Jerusalem prior to becoming a "son of the covenant" at age 13 in order to learn what was to be expected of Jesus. His parents were doing all the right things good Jewish parents would do.
- Given Jesus' extended family was traveling together on the way home, it would have been common for the men to travel together, the women to travel together, and the children to go back and forth. So each parent likely thought Jesus was with the other.

- We can only imagine how distressed Mary and Joseph must have been after three days of searching for Jesus. But this scenario raises important questions for us also: Where did Jesus sleep? Who made sure he was safe? And perhaps most importantly, who fed this boy? If you've ever had to feed a 12-year-old boy, you know this is not a small matter.
- From what is implied in the passage, the community stepped in for a boy they didn't know. They saw Jesus, and they welcomed him to the table. They listened to him. And by the time his parents caught up with him, he was amazing the people with his questions and ideas.
- Wonder aloud whether the experience of young people in your church is like Jesus' experience. Do they feel seen, heard, known, welcomed? And not only teenagers, but what about young adults, single people, those new to the community? Sometimes young people feel segregated from the life of the church, sent off to their own "kids' table" rather than being welcomed to the intergenerational life God intends for Christian community.

Deeper Reflection

- New research from the Fuller Youth Institute has revealed that young people ages 15-29 are looking for churches to welcome them to the full table. While we might assume they want a cool church, what they really want is a warm church. A church that says, "You belong here." A church that is willing to accept young people where they are and authentically walk with them into adulthood in light of God's grace. One of

the most common descriptors young people in the research used to describe the churches they love was "like family."

- Theologian Miroslav Volf draws on the warm communion of the Trinity to undergird warmth in the church. He contends "We are the church" doesn't mean "We meet occasionally" or "We cooperate in a current project." Instead, we actually become part of one another. This sounds like Paul's exhortation that in the Body of Christ, "each member belongs to all the others" (Rom. 12:5).
- Rather than see ourselves as a loosely affiliated group of spiritual persons having simultaneous individual spiritual experiences, Scripture suggests we are adopted into one body. That means we're connected tendon-to-bone across generations as we work out faith together.
- Tell a story or two here about your own congregation that illustrate warm community in some way, ideally highlighting intergenerational relationships and/or the welcome of a young person into church life. Or invite a young person ahead of time to join you at this point and tell their own story as a testimony to how the warmth of the congregation helped them find their place.
- Follow this story by sharing that while the majority of churches across the US are aging and shrinking, some are growing young, meaning they are engaging young people like the person who just shared. Both in Jesus' time as well as today, churches that grow young find adolescents and emerging adults who need our welcome and embrace and become a warm home for them.
- Not only do young people benefit from a warm community, but also the entire church benefits. Just like the adults around the boy Jesus benefited from his presence and his questions, we all grow in vitality when young people are around.

Implications and Practices:

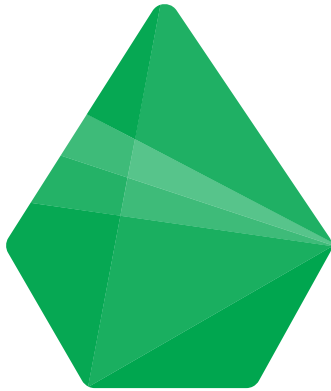
What if one of the measures of our success as a church was our extension of hospitality to young people?

The good news for all of us is that Jesus intends to pull us together. Just like Jesus reconciles us to God, Jesus also reconciles us to each other.

Perhaps encourage the selection of 1-3 opportunities in the church calendar in the next months for folks to attend and try to welcome young people "like family."

Consider inviting the congregation to say "hi" to a young person sometime at church in the next month. Not all of them today, because that would be overwhelming to young people. But in the coming weeks, notice them, say hello, maybe even walk a different way to your car so your paths cross with young people.

All of us can look for ways to gather all the generations around the same table. All of us can look for ways to heat up the warmth in our church family. Because when we become a warm church, we become a young church—a church where young people—and all of us—want to grow.



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