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**MORE THAN THE CHILDREN'S SERMON:  
FAMILY-FRIENDLY WORSHIP**

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**WORSHIP THIS MORNING**

Worship this morning was wonderful ... and family-friendly! The highlights: 1) three generations of women in the pew ahead of us, 2) "Mom" and "Dad" was inscribed in the front of my hymnal, and 3) a sermon illustration about a real young girl, who lives the love of Christ.

My husband and I, empty nesters now, only rarely have the pleasure of sharing the pew with our adult children, but we love to see other families together in worship. This morning, we watched three generations of women slide into the front pew – two grandmas, a mom, an aunt and, in the center, a precious eight year old girl. The little girl sat up so straight, glancing from side to side with a smile, reflected on the faces of the women who obviously loved her. Throughout worship, hands were ready to show the place in the bulletin, to run a finger along the words in the hymnal, to reach out in loving touch to this little girl. Were they there years ago at the baptismal font, making promises to God on behalf of this child? They were there now to keep the promises, to include her in the family of God, to make her feel welcome and loved in the midst of this worshiping community.

And the hymnal? Did I mention that the inscription was in pencil - big, bold capitals, lettered by a young child's hand: MOM and DAD. For this child, the first leaders of worship were Mom and Dad. They were the ones who sat with this child in worship, inscribed on the heart, as well as in the hymnal. Beloved parents had been telling God's story, had brought this child of God to worship in God's house. How faithful to the promises they made at the baptismal font.

What about the sermon illustration? The pastor told a real story of his fifth grade daughter. A newly immigrated Cambodian girl came into her class, knowing only four words of English. Grace invited her into her life, into her circle of friends, and onto her relay team. The choice cost her team first place in the race, but they won the race of faithfulness - they welcomed the stranger in Jesus' name, they loved her as they have been loved. It was a poignant story for all of us, but think about the 8 year old in the front pew. She

heard a story about a girl like her, with choices like the ones she needs to make. We all need to find ourselves in God's story, to find God in our story. The sermon today helped a young sister in Christ do just that.

For me, these were examples of what family-friendly worship might look like and a reminder that Jesus welcomed the children and told us adults that unless we become like this little child, we will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Children in worship complete the Body of Christ. They are not the future of the church; they are the present.

## **BEFORE WE EVER GET TO CHURCH**

The Youth & Family Institute knows the power of partnering home and congregation to pass on faith. The congregation becomes the place that equips the home to nurture faith. The home prepares the child to connect with community, to worship and learn together.

Home is the place where Mom and Dad are the first face and voice and arms of God to a child. Through them, children learn to find God in every aspect of their daily lives. They learn the stories of faith and they learn to pray at bedtime. They learn to thank God for food and for the stunning beauty of their world. They learn that God cares when they are sad or hurt, that God forgives, that God loves them, no matter how hard the day. They learn to care for others, to help others, to pray for others, because God has first loved them. This, too, is worship.

What else can parents do to ready their child for congregational worship?

- Sing songs of faith.
- Pray the Lord's Prayer.
- Recite the Apostles' Creed (or the creed used in your worship).
- Read Bible stories, so scripture will be familiar.
- Find a book about worship, like *Come Worship With Me* or *A Children's Guide to Worship*, to familiarize children with the parts of worship, the symbols they will see in the sanctuary. Children thrive when they know what to expect.

Children are sponges who look to their parents as role models. If getting ready for church is stressful and contentious, they won't be eager or feel it's important to worship. Like the 8 year old in the front pew, children check to see what adults are doing and how they are doing it. Attitude is as important as behavior.

Sometimes, parents don't know what to do ... or, even that it is important to do anything. The congregation can provide newsletter articles, bulletin inserts, a parenting class, or a home visit to help parents know what to do and how to do it.

## **BEGIN EARLY**

No, I haven't lost my mind. And, yes, I do know how difficult it can be to worship with young children. Bringing children to worship from infancy helps children learn what is expected – what they can expect of the worship service and what is expected of them. To hold an infant in loving arms, to rock them in the faith, is a gift. Babies learn that worship is that familiar repetition of loud sounds and silence, singing and speaking, standing and sitting, all from the safe harbor of a parent's arms. Worship becomes a welcome and welcoming place, familiar, safe, associated with wonderful memories.

Waiting until "later" often means postponing worship until the child or adolescent feels lost in the unfamiliar, bored and embarrassed by what they don't understand, impatient to get out of the sanctuary and back to life that is familiar and ... doesn't include a faith community.

## **THE CHURCH BUILDING**

Think about a child's first impression. What helps children believe, "We were expecting you"?

- Add a second doorknob on the front door, at child-height.
- Invite families to be greeters, including the children.
- Use nametags for everyone.
- Provide worship bags, typically filled with soft toys that tell a Bible story, crayons, scripture related pictures to color, a soft book, a children's bulletin.

## **IT SHOULD BE EDUCATION AND WORSHIP**

So many congregations, by scheduling Sunday School at the same time as worship, make it seem like a choice: education OR worship? Both are necessary to build up the Body of Christ. If we as adults feel that worship is important to our faith life, why would we deprive children of Word and Sacrament in community? If we feel it is important for our children to learn about the faith, why wouldn't we commit to being lifelong learners?

## **THE WORSHIP SERVICE**

Often, adults with young children choose or are directed to sit in the back. Easier to make a quick escape if the child makes noise or wiggles. But, what can you see from there that makes you feel connected to worship or to the worshipping community? The backs of heads, that's what!

Some congregations have removed the front pews and put rocking chairs or quilts on the floor. Some have reserved the front several pews for young children and those worshipping with them.

Children's sermons can be effective if they respect the developmental level of the children and never get a laugh at the children's expense. Many adults appreciate the concrete object lesson, linked to our everyday lives.

Other congregations have done the following:

- Have good readers (even very young ones) read the lessons.
- Use a children's Bible for the lessons.
- Invite families with children to usher.
- Invite children and youth to collect the offering.
- Regard children's choirs as leading worship, not cute entertainment.
- Include songs the children know.
- Simplify the language to be readable by children.
- Invite youth to deliver the message ... on a Sunday other than Youth Sunday.

- Work with children and youth so that they understand what they are reading or doing in the service and know how to do it really well.
- Thank them for leading worship.
- Ask children and youth what else they would like to do or experience in worship.
- Mark faith milestones during worship - receiving a Bible, blessing backpacks, beginning confirmation, blessing new driver's licenses, and blessing and sending youth as they graduate from high school.

## **TAKING IT HOME**

Make sure that children and their families have something to take with them when they go out into the world to share their faith and to serve. Give them FaithTalk cards or a simple family devotion to take home, to continue the conversation. This is the ultimate way to integrate worship with all of life.