Children in church <http://truthnotes.net/2015/05/18/kids-in-church-why-bother/>

Kids in Church- Why Bother?

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I don’t know why I even bother.  Trying to corral five children in church by one’s self is not for the faint of heart.  And truth be told, by the time I’m halfway through the service I’m usually mad at one or more of said children.  I generally hear about half of the sermon, if I’m lucky.  I usually have to take out the baby and/or toddler at some point.  And to what end?  Is it even worth it?  Do they even get anything out of the service?  Do I?  Like I said, I often wonder why I even bother.  And yesterday was no exception until something amazing happened.

My 2 1/2-year old was fidgeting and whining as usual, and I held her in my arms during the confession and absolution because otherwise she would crawl under the pews or try to open the windows.  But of course, she didn’t want to be in my arms and was flailing around trying to get away.  Sigh.  It was going to be a long service.  During the Introit I tried to distract her by whispering into her ear until the Gloria Patri came to the rescue and the organ covered up her whining.  But as I sang the words I realized that *she* was singing them too.  Unprompted.  And then she sang the Kyrie with us as well.  By the time we got to the Gloria in Excelsis she’d had enough of that and started up her whining again, pleading to go sit with the church secretary.  But it was enough.  Enough to give me assurance that I wasn’t doing this for nothing.  She actually *was* getting something out of the services, despite all outward appearances.  We don’t sing the liturgy at home with our kids.  They hear the Gloria Patri and Kyrie in church once a week, and that’s it.  And half the time I’m pretty sure she isn’t paying attention anyhow.  Yet today she sang it with the rest of the congregation.  Incredible.  Who says the Holy Spirit can’t work in the hearts of young children?

Look, I *know* it’s tough to bring young kids to church.  Trust me.  I really do know.  I even wrote an article about a year ago called[*Getting Kids to Behave in Church*](http://www.sisterdaughtermotherwife.com/2014/05/getting-kids-to-behave-in-church.html) for the blog [Sister, Daughter, Mother, Wife](http://www.sisterdaughtermotherwife.com/)*,* so it’s definitely an issue I’ve been dealing with for a while.  Kids can be loud, distracting, annoying, and just plain *bad* in church.  They can embarrass you.  You can embarrass yourself dealing with their shenanigans.  But it’s not a pointless pursuit.  Kids soak up repetition like a sponge.  The liturgy set to music is a perfect thing for them to memorize.  The Lord’s Prayer and the Creeds are easily memorized when kids hear them over and over again in church.  Even my 2 1/2-year old can pray those with us.  Maybe not word for word, but pretty darn close.  Years ago, my dad (a pastor) was teaching confirmation class and told them they had to memorize the entire Apostles’ Creed for the following week.  They started complaining that it was too long, so my dad brought in my kindergarten brother, who rattled it off in front of them perfectly.  One of the students said, “Yeah, well, that’s because he’s in church every week.”  Bingo.  That’s exactly right.

Parents, please don’t give up.  Don’t fall for the lie that kids don’t get anything out of church.  Oh, they may not be able to tell you what the sermon was about or even what the readings were about for any given week.  But they’ll surprise you.  After my grandmother’s funeral some years back, the Gospel reading the following Sunday was the raising of Lazarus, with Jesus’ promise, “I am the resurrection and the life.”  My three-year old looked up at me and said in wonder, “Mommy, that’s for great-grandma!”  I didn’t even know he had been listening.  Do you see how powerfully God’s Word works in the hearts of children?  And *that’s* why I bother, week after week, month after month, year after year.  Every church service provides another opportunity for God to strengthen their faith as they are surrounded by fellow believers in His house.  Eventually my kids will be able to sit through and participate in an entire service on their own.  But for now, I’ll take my 2 1/2-year old singing the Gloria Patri and Kyrie with us, thanks be to God.

Living Our Vocations as Lutheran Women

**May 9, 2014**

Getting Kids to Behave in Church

By Ruth Meyer

A little over a year ago I posted the following on Facebook: “I totally get the challenge of keeping kids quiet in church, but letting your kids play Angry Birds on silent mode on your phone rubs me the wrong way.”  There followed a lively discussion on said topic, with some excellent points made all around.  It got me thinking about kids in church, and I realized I’d been asking the wrong question all along.  I had been asking, “How can I keep my kids quiet in church?” when I should have been asking, “How can I teach my children what church is?”  We don’t bring our children to church to “keep them quiet.”  We bring them there to hear God’s Word and receive His blessings.  If they’re quiet in the process, that’s wonderful, but that shouldn’t be our ultimate goal.

When our oldest was a baby, I had a bag full of tricks for every church service.  I had Cheerios to stuff in his mouth the second he started squawking, a sippy cup to keep him occupied, and books and quiet activities galore.  Frankly, I missed a goodly portion of the service because I was so concerned about keeping him quiet.  But then a curious thing happened.  We had another baby, and as he got older, so did our oldest.  Suddenly I realized that the oldest, now 3, was old enough to not need Cheerios or books.  I wanted him to be participating as best he could.  He could stand when we stood, fold his hands when we prayed, even recite the Lord’s Prayer with us.  But he wasn’t.  He was trying to snitch Cheerios from his younger brother or sneak books out of the diaper bag.  Something had to change.

That marked a turning point for me.  I realized that to get kids to behave in church I had to show them why we were there in the first place.  And the sooner they learned that lesson, the better.  I didn’t want them to associate church with quiet play time.  I wanted them to remember what we do in church.  We sing hymns.  We pray.  We listen to God’s Word read and proclaimed.  We go up to the communion rail together.  We aren’t there to color or read other books or play Angry Birds or even stuff Cheerios into our mouths.

So what can be done?  First, discuss with your husband a plan of action.  The more children you have, and the younger they are, the more of a challenge worship will be.  So have a plan.  My own case is rather unique in that for the first 8 years or so, I was often the only parent in the pew with our kids.  Now that I am the organist, the tide has turned.  My mother sits with my husband to help with the four kids.  If at all possible, especially with younger children, have a helper.  (Hint- your husband can be that helper!)  Babies and toddlers generally require more attention than an 8-year old.  And let’s face it, a 22-month old isn’t going to sit there and listen to the Scripture readings quietly.  I hear my 22-month old throughout the service, and if she gets too loud my mother takes her to the cry room- not to play, mind you, but to the cry room pews where her noise isn’t too distracting to other worshippers.

When is a child “too distracting?”  In general, my daughter isn’t so bad.  She’s vocal, yes, but it’s usually excited chatter on her part.  “Mommy!” she cries when she sees me.  “Jesus!” she yells when she sees the cross.  “Doggie!” she protests when she drops her stuffed dog.  Are these things overly distracting?  I don’t believe so.  If she starts yelling them over and over, then sure, time to leave.  But don’t let them off the hook that easily.  If you take them out at the first outburst they will quickly learn to manipulate you.  Keep them in the sanctuary with everyone else if at all possible.  With our 22-month old, we do allow her a sippy cup and her doggie.  But we’ve found that if we allow books and other things to distract her, they provide more of a distraction for our older children than for her!  Be cautious when allowing distractions in church, because that’s exactly what they do- distract from the reason we’re there in the first place.

What about preschoolers?  If possible, have a preschooler sit on your lap for worship.  Show them where you are in the bulletin or hymnal, help them stand and sit with everyone else, and encourage them to recite the Lord’s Prayer and the Creed with the congregation.  Preschoolers can also pick up rather quickly the words we speak during Confession.  If your church does the same liturgy on a regular basis, preschoolers also memorize these words and canticles easily.  Even before children can read and follow along on their own, they can participate if they have memorized certain parts of the service.  Before each reading, whisper to your preschooler a little summary of what will be read so he or she knows what to listen for.  Or make it a “game,” for lack of a better word.  “Okay, sweetie, in this reading Jesus is going to do a miracle.  Listen carefully and tell me what it is afterward.”  Kids love that kind of thing.  The whole point is to get them involved in the service from a young age.

A child who is learning to read can follow along as you point with your finger to the words in the hymnal or bulletin.  It makes them feel important once they can actually participate like the adults.  And once a child can read and follow along on his or her own, the expectation should be that they do so with the entire service.  They can find the hymns on their own, read the readings if they’re printed out in the bulletin, and listen during the sermon.  We recently bought our 8-year old his very own hymnal with his name engraved on it.  He now takes it to church with him and is as proud as anything to use it.  Consider giving an engraved Bible or hymnal as a gift once your children reach a certain age or can follow along completely on their own in church.

It’s also important to consider where you sit in church.  Most families with young children sit in the back so they can take the kids out if they need to.  That’s what we have always done, honestly.  But as my older kids get older, I’m seeing the benefit of having them sit at the front of church.  There were a few evening services during Lent that only our older boys attended, and they were allowed to sit in the front of church.  Their behavior there was far superior to their behavior when they sat toward the back.  In the back they can see other kids and often get sucked into goofing off with them or making faces to get a laugh.  Sitting at the front removes such distractions.  Mull it over and see if you can’t step it up a few pews.

And what about bathroom breaks for older kids?  “Mom, I really have to go to the bathroom!” your second-grader whispers.  And while that may be true, chances are if you let him go, he’ll be out for 10 minutes, taking his jolly old time, getting a drink, etc.  So our policy is this:  if you have to go to the bathroom or blow your nose or whatever, fine.  But then you have to re-copy what you miss while you’re out.  If you miss an entire 8 verse hymn, you can copy it after church.  If you miss the reading of the Samaritan woman at the well, no problem.  You can copy those 45 verses later.  I’m telling you, this seriously works.  The first Sunday we tried this, our 8-year old absolutely had to use the restroom and so left during the offering.  After church he worriedly asked me, “Do I have to copy the music you played during the offering?”  (I didn’t make him do that, FYI.  The offering is a “safe” time for them to leave if necessary.)  But honestly, that completely took care of the bathroom issue during church.

Basically the whole issue of getting kids to behave in church boils down to this:  From the very beginning, teach them why they are there in the first place.  Remove as many distractions as you can.  Model how to behave in church.  Expect them to do the same.  Children will live up or down to your expectations.  If your expectations are so low that you only think they’ll behave when playing Angry Birds on silent mode, they’ll happily comply.  But if you expect participation from them and model reverent behavior on your own part as well, they will learn to live up to that expectation.  Remember, the Holy Spirit works faith in the hearts of children of all ages.  Don’t let others tell you that kids can’t get anything out of church.  That’s a lie.  From my 10-year old who can sing half of “Jesus Christ is Risen Today” for memory down to my 22-month old who sees the cross and shouts “Jesus!” the Holy Spirit is actively at work in their hearts, as He is in yours and mine.  “Let the little children come to me,” Jesus says, “and do not hinder them, for the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these” (Mark 10:14, italics mine).  Amen.

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Ruth Meyer is living out her vocation as a Lutheran woman in the roles of sister, daughter, mother, and wife.  Her greatest joy in life is living as a redeemed child of God, who has blessed her in her many vocations.  Besides her human relationships, Ruth's other interests include music and writing.  She is a church musician and has a special love for Lutheran hymnody.  She also loves to write, and has a children's book set to be published through CPH this fall.  Ruth keeps her own blog at truthnotes.net.  Her hope is that through her writing you are encouraged and perhaps even challenged in your God-given vocations.

[](http://uberhavoc.com/the-14-best-funny-news-bloopers-that-have-ever-happened/9174?grvVariant=93a5d111a73cae21e5aa4e12c6ab3722)

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