



MERCY CHILDREN

WELCOMING CHILDREN IN WORSHIP

by Rev. Sam Wheatley



At every child's baptism I ask the church, "Will you as a congregation undertake the responsibility of assisting these parents in the Christian nurture of this child?" Every time you have answered with a hearty "Yes!" We then fittingly clap, smile and dote on these newest members of our church. Those sweet babies grow up. They become rambunctious, fidgety and fussy during our services. But they also learn how to worship. They sing; they pray; they understand more and more about the Bible and God's unique love for them. They become followers of Jesus alongside of us. However, that development doesn't happen in a straight line. Growth comes in fits and starts. Such growth takes thoughtful parenting to guide children into this life of worship. But, even more importantly, the spiritual growth of our children takes the involvement of the whole church. That's why we promise our assistance to parents at the baptism of their children; we are vowing to pitch in and help grow these children into adults who follow and love the Lord.

One of the clear signs of growth at Mercy is the number of young worshippers. **We now have about 70 children age 10 and younger!** This means that the work of assisting parents in the Christian nurture of their children needs to be more intentional and broadly understood by the whole congregation.

The first question many of you might have is "**Why do we have children in the service at all -- other congregations have separate services for children, why don't we?**" The reason we have chosen not to do that is based on our understanding of the nature of Christian community.

From the beginning, God deals not simply with people as individuals, but as communities. In Genesis 2:18 God specifically says that being alone is not good. Now that does not mean that everyone has to marry and have children, but it does mean that the way humans flourish is in community with others. In community we are known, we are encouraged, and we grow. In isolation, we are tempted to see only things from our own points of view and to undervalue the gifts and perspectives of others.

God redeems a people, not just individuals. The technical theological language for this insight is "covenant theology." A covenant is a compact between a superior and an inferior that stipulates the relationship between the two. When this compact or law is reflected on in Scripture it is always with the eye on the community of God's people. In Deuteronomy 6 we read the following:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk along the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Here we see the call to love God with all our might. Note the you's in this passage are all second person plurals (y'all, youz guys, youins, you all). "Here is how you all are to love God as a people." Then the command takes on more weight when God asks His people not only to think of their own generation, but to bring up the next generation of His people as those who will love God. The implications are important to note. The way we instill faith in the next generation is by going about our day with an intention of explaining, in the regular interactions of life, the work of God. This is an integrationist approach to discipleship, not a separatist approach. The current generation is to include and explain to children "as we go along with life" the glory of the Lord.

This approach doesn't change in the New Testament. Jesus in Luke 18 takes the challenge of Deuteronomy 6 up a notch. He not only says that children are present so that we can teach them; He says that we can't understand the kingdom of God except by learning from children:

"People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

Children are both an opportunity for the church and a blessing to the church. You may next ask, "***But what about the practical challenges to having children in the service? How are we going to balance having children actively engaged in the service so that it doesn't become chaotic?***" Our attitudes and ideas are important in this joint venture.

ATTITUDE

Our goal is for children to become active participants in the service. However, we recognize that that is a growth issue for children, parents and the larger congregation. Teaching, training, understanding, and grace will be needed as we engage this issue. Therefore, I am asking for all of us to have an encouraging attitude as we grow in this endeavor. Below are some ideas for fostering such an attitude:

Worship is for God. We are present because He calls us, His people, into fellowship with Him weekly. One simple change that will help us remember the purpose of our time together is to intentionally call our time together "worship," rather than "church." We are the church; we gather together to worship. Saying things on Saturday night like "tomorrow we get to go worship God" or "isn't it great that God calls us to worship Him!" are good reminders to our children and to us that we are not simply attending church like we go to the store or other routine duties, but that worship of God is a high privilege and something to look forward to. Having special family activities, foods, or games that only happen on Sundays makes the day special to your kids and will impart a sense that Sunday is a special day -- as it is! This attitude applies to all of us regardless if we have children or not. We should anticipate and look forward to our time of worship.

Noises are normal. When kids make regular noises (cries, rustlings, dropping things, bodily noises, etc.), as a congregation, don't scowl or get angry. Conversely, don't draw undue attention by laughing loudly or pointing. Children are not going to be perfectly quiet and total silence is not our goal for them. Parents, don't worry about distracting others when your child makes normal kid noises -- we are glad your children are part of the service and some noise is expected. On the flip side, if a child is being disruptive (noisy on purpose, calling attention to themselves, repeatedly speaking loudly, etc.) then the parents (Dads this means you too) need to take them out to the foyer and appropriately let the child know that this behavior isn't OK. Then come back into the service. It is important to not let children get their way by being disruptive. Remember, the goal of children in worship is for them to grow into being active worshippers; that skill, like eating well,

being organized, and taking care of money is something that is learned, not something that blooms organically. Worthwhile goals take time and patient repetition. The younger and more consistently we help our children learn to worship the easier this will be as they mature.

Encourage our being worshippers. Parents, Sunday School teachers, family friends and fellow worshippers watch for and compliment children when you see them participating and worshipping well. A simple comment like "Jane, I noticed that you've learned the Apostles' Creed -- that's awesome!" or "Billy, you were such a good listener in church today. You really encouraged me to be a good listener too." These simple affirmations of active worship help our children see that their behavior has a positive influence upon others - an important lesson for us all.

Talk to your kids about worship outside of the sanctuary. Parents ask your children on the way home from worship about the day; what they noticed? What stood out to them about the Bible reading? Did they understand the sermon? What was Sunday School like today? Do they have any questions about things that happened? Share your answers with your children as well. By doing so you are underscoring that worship is for all of us regardless of our age. The process of reflection is something everyone, regardless of whether we have children or not, needs.

IDEAS

Our goal is for children to become active participants in the service. Parents, grandparents, and other members of the congregation can help our children and ourselves prepare for worship throughout the week by doing some of the following.

Great worship on Sunday morning starts on Saturday night. All of us can make decisions the evening before in order to enter into worship more prepared and alert.

- **At dinner on Saturday, talk about going to worship in the morning.** Pray with your kids about the upcoming service, for their friends they will see on Sunday, for their Sunday School teachers, for the musicians and those that lead in the service, etc.
- **Lay out clothes for the next day. Involve your children, ask them what they would like to wear?** Talk about how you choose clothes for Sunday -- if your family dresses up then talk about why. Make sure the outfit is ready for the morning so that there is no scrambling for missing accessories.
- **If you are going out on Saturday night, don't stay out late so that you and your children have good rest before worship on Sunday.** This models to your children that Sunday is special and needs to be prepared for as you would anything else you value.
- **Create a special ritual for Saturday night that prepares you all as a family for worship the next morning.** Maybe sing a special song at bedtime, or read a passage from the children's Bible about worship, etc.
- **Prepare for worship throughout the week.** Take the Sunday bulletin home and sing with your kids the songs we regularly sing, read the responsive readings together at dinner, talk about the Bible passage we're focusing on, etc.
- **Memorize the fundamental parts of the liturgy.** Learn for yourself and teach your children the Apostles' Creed, The Lord's Prayer, the standard responses like "Thanks be to God" after the reading of God's word. Having these simple but powerful pieces of Christian theology memorized by your children will be

used by God for their entire lives. After these are memorized, memorizing portions of scripture together as a family are a vital part of Christian maturity. Suggested scripture to memorize; Genesis 1:1 Joshua 1:8, Psalm 23, Psalm 119:105, Proverbs 3:5-6, John 1:12, John 3:16, John 14:6, Matthew 28:18-20, Romans 3:23, Romans 6:23, Romans 12:1-2, 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, 1 Corinthians 10:13, Philippians 4:8, Philippians 4:19, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, 1 John 1:9. These can be written on a 3x5 card and kept on the dinner table to review as a family. Then more than just memorizing, talk about the passage and what it means to you and how it's helped you.

- **Make family meals a priority.** Note: that meal may not be a dinner due to family schedules, so don't drop this just because it's not dinner -- eat together and talk about your days and things you saw or thought during the day. As parents model that meals are not just about eating, children grow up learning to talk with their family about small and large things in the context of warm fellowship.

Great worship has a Sunday plan. Paying attention to ourselves and our children will help the worship experience go better.

- **Take kids to the bathroom right before the start of the service, even if they "don't have to go," go anyway.**
- **Assess your child** — has this been a particularly hard morning? Then perhaps sit toward the back of the chapel so that it'll be easy to exit if you need to.
- **Enlist others to help.** Talk with other parents who are wanting to help their kids grow in worship and sit near one another to offer support and an extra set of hands or encouraging smiles. Grandparents, Empty Nesters and/or family friends can act as Pew Pals who can help out on mornings when one of the parents is not in the service or when there is a need for extra help.
- **Don't sweat it if you miss part of the service.** Sermons are podcast and you can listen later if need be; music can be heard in the foyer; etc. Remember, the goal is to have children who grow into lifelong worshippers, missing a few elements of the service for that goal is a good investment of time.
- **Bring quiet activities.** While we do have children's bulletins, it may be helpful to bring some of your own drawing paper and quiet activities for your children to engage with during the service. As children get older, their ability to listen and participate in all aspects of the service should increase, so playing games on a Gameboy or phone should be discouraged. Instead you can ask your children to draw a picture from the scripture reading or to write down one thing they thought about God from the service, or questions they have. Remember, our goal is active worshippers, not just quiet children.

CONCERNS

Mercy's goal for our children and for us all is to become active participants in the worship of God. There are some common concerns with having children as part of the service that I'd like to address.

"I find children distracting in the service." Sometimes they are, but there are ways to deal with this issue. If you don't know any children at Mercy, make an effort to get to know families. Knowing the families you are part of a congregation with helps diminish the annoyance. Pray for our children and their parents on a regular basis. From experience I know that the more I pray for someone, the less I am annoyed by them. Also, you can move more to the front of the synagogue. There are empty seats up front and fewer people in front of you will be less distracting.

"Worship is boring for young children." We have to be careful not to fall into the traps set for us by an entertainment driven society. Worship is not entertainment. The goal of entertainment is to fill our time; the goal of worship is to fit us for eternity. That doesn't mean that Mercy doesn't make great effort to ensure that our services are engaging, but it does mean that our goal is not simply to stimulate our senses. For adults and children alike, there will be parts of our services that are going to be dull at times. When those times happen the question to ask is "is this dull because it's not something God has called us to do or is it dull because I'm not in a place to appreciate it?" As our own children were growing up there inevitably would be foods that they didn't like. We would say "Well I guess you're just not old enough to like it." Tastes develop over time and in time we'd serve something that previously got the "I don't like it" response and the now older kid would say "that was good, I'm old enough to like this now." In worship, as in feeding the family, we take note of things that our family doesn't particularly favor, but we don't give up on expanding the palate. Be careful to not assume worship is boring for your child, as your attitude toward worship sets the tone for your child.

"My child is too young to understand what's going on." Any parent who has had the experience of riding in the car and hearing a child reference a comment between spouses that you thought was private, will realize that kids pick up far more than we typically think. Children process as children, not adults, but that doesn't mean that what they pick up from worship is below or less important than what we grasp. The most simple realizations -- those that even very young children can intuit -- are some of the most foundational concepts that all our later thinking as Christians builds upon; that I'm with people who love me that are more than my immediate family, that God is present here, that this time is special to my parents, that I'm part of a community saved by Jesus, that I can talk to God as my Father.

"My child won't sit still during the service." Perhaps a time during the week when you prepare for Sunday might include sitting next to your child "practicing" for Sunday. Try simply sitting next to them, cuddling them against you and sharing a gentle quiet activity like looking through a picture book or a puzzle. The longest stretch someone has to sit still at Mercy is going to be during the sermon. I strive to keep that portion of our worship between 25 and 30 minutes. We recognize that children under 5 years old may have struggles with sitting for this long; therefore, we've provided the foyer for you to use. The audio from the service is available in the foyer. Or, you can bring your child into the service until the sermon and then go with your toddler to children's church in the courtyard for the second half of the service. Make staying for the whole service a goal that you work with your child on. Perhaps a special event or reward for when they can stay for the whole service will be an encouragement. We also know there are special situations, where for numerous reasons, it is difficult even for older children. In such cases, would you please let me or one of the elders of the church know so that we can figure out a solution with you?

"I want a break from parenting once a week and Sunday is my time." Worship is not for you; it is for God. It is a sacrifice of praise, not a rest from the responsibilities of life. That said, there is obviously a need for overburdened parents to get a break. Perhaps talk with your spouse or friend about taking the kid(s) home after the service to allow you a couple of hours of rest on Sunday. Then you come home and do the same for them. There are many creative ways to have time to regroup, but Sunday worship is not that personal time.

ENCOURAGEMENT

At Mercy, we are trying to chart a third way with children. We want to avoid both dangers of segregating our children from the worship service and making the service a tortuous experience for them (and us). Our goal is for our children to grow up into active participants in the worship of a holy, loving God. We want them to wholeheartedly follow and love Jesus.

What then is the church going to do to equip the saints for this work of ministry? We will consistently communicate our goal and seek to provide help to parents and caretakers to be successful.

- Our Children's Ministry is coordinated by Emily Freeman. Emily oversees a team that is open to feedback and suggestions on how to improve communication and support parents and others in raising our children well. Please reach out to them to offer your input and help.
- Mercy will be planning several round tables during the year for families to share ideas and have some of our "older" parents encourage newer parents on how to foster spiritual growth and appreciation of worship in their children.
- We will eventually be recruiting interested members who want to serve as "Pew Pals" to assist families with younger children during the service.
- We will provide a list of resources for parents in this enterprise (*see the resource list at the end of this article*).
- We expect participation, not perfect behavior from our youngest worshippers. We will seek to include children at every activity of our church, treating children as vital members of our congregation. If your child would like to read Scripture or participate in other ways (greeting, helping with setup, etc.), let us know.
- We will launch a children's lesson as a regular feature of our service in order to help our children know that they are a vital part of our congregation.
- We, as a congregation, expect the normal sounds of children in our midst; it is a sign of God blessing us and calling us into the important work of raising the next generation of Christian men and women.
- We will welcome children to come forward to celebrate the Lord's Table by praying for them and blessing them. However, we do ask that all children who partake of the table profess faith in Christ. If you would like your child to participate, please contact me as your pastor and I'll be happy to plan a visit with you and your child to ask him/her (like anyone wishing to participate) for an expression of faith in Christ.
- When we pray as a congregation, we will welcome children to express prayers and requests to the Lord like anyone else.
- I will include children — their needs, fears and hopes — as an audience to address in the preaching of the Word of God.
- We won't always succeed. Our efforts will not always hit the mark and there will be times where we simply don't offer the help needed to move toward this goal of fostering active worship. When that happens would you please:
 - Not suffer in silence, but reach out to leaders in the church to let them know where we need to improve?
 - Offer suggestions based on your family's experience that will help us make corrections?

Every year Mercy becomes more multi-generational. We are a congregation where children, parents and grandparents are worshipping together. In this we see God's faithfulness from generation to generation. As we faithfully work to draw our children into the worshipping life of the church, we will see that visible expression of God's work move into the next generation of His people. This work is important because it is through the children of our congregation that God will raise up a people who will be His representatives, His ambassadors to an emerging culture. As we faithfully raise our children to worship God, He will use them in powerful and gracious ways in their lifetimes.

RESOURCES

Parenting in the Pew by Robbie Castleman

A great practical guide for guiding parents into the joy and challenges of worship.

Is It a Lost Cause? by Marva Dawn

A thoughtful exploration of how to think biblically about the challenges facing us as a church with respect to raising children in contemporary North American culture.

The Calvin (College) Institute of Christian Worship

<http://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/let-the-children-come/>