

Why I Bring My Children to Church

Children's Sabbath

Matthew 19:13-15

My name is Kallie Stroh and I serve here as the Director of Children and Families ministries. In addition to my work at the church, I am also a mom. I have two boys, Jackson, who is 5 and Aaron who is 2. They are sweet, silly, busy boys. When you look around in the pews next to you, sometimes you'll see children quietly sitting in the pews respectfully paying attention or maybe coloring or looking at a book. Those respectful, quiet children are not my children.

I have been working in churches for a number of years now, so being in and around church is not new to them. But if you have ever watched my children in worship, you would not think that that is the case.

Aaron, my two year old, feels the need to pull the pages of the bulletin apart and make sure they are evenly scattered all over the floor. That is, if you can even get him to sit with you in the pew in the first place. He's my independent little guy and he likes his freedom. Freedom to a two year old equals running around outside, with mommy chasing after him. And if he doesn't get his freedom when he wants it, he can get loud.

Jackson was a little wild when he was younger, but at 5 years old now he is a little more capable of sitting still. But some days he gets a little restless too. He once leaned over to me partway through a sermon once and asked, "When is this show going to be over?"

As a parent of young children I spend more time trying to quiet my kids, or chasing behind them than I can focusing on worship. I worry they will be distracting to everyone around us, and no one is more aware of every little sound they make than I am. Most days just getting to church is exhausting enough. Having to then try to corral and monitor my children leaves me feeling defeated – which is counterproductive to the reason for being at worship in the first place.

So what is the point? Why should I even bring my children to church? Why don't I just wait until they are older?

I bring them to church for three major reasons.

The first reason is: I bring my children to church for them. I want my children to learn that the church is a place that teaches love. Schools, daycares, even the playground can teach important life skills: reading, writing, how to get along with others, patience, sharing, waiting your turn. While those are great life skills and I'm glad my children are learning them, church is the one place that teaches love above all else. Church is a place where we openly show grace. A place we feel safe and that we have the permission to openly speak of God and love – without worrying we might offend someone.

At church, kids have the opportunity to form relationship with each other, outside of the pressure-cooker of comparison and completion that exists in our schools. They will have the chance to interact with kids who are older and younger, who come from different schools or different communities.

At church, I'm hoping my kids will also form relationships with caring adults who are involved in children and youth ministry who have no expectations of achievement. At church we aren't looking at a kid to determine their academic, athletic, or artistic ability. We aren't evaluating them. We welcome them as a child of God. We are always glad to see them, no matter what is going on in their life.

At church, I want my kids will learn an alternate life narrative to that which is glorified in mainstream culture. Certainly achievement and accomplishments can be very good. But learning that happiness and self-worth can be measured by something other than material and financial success is a valuable lesson and one that doesn't get taught many places.

I hope my kids learn the stories the Bible has to teach us, but I want them to learn more about God than what they can read in a book. I want them to experience God in relationships and in community. I want them to know how it feels to seek and serve Christ, and I hope they will feel the light of Christ in their own hearts.

By bringing my kids to church, I am hoping to open them up to all of these possibilities. I want my kids to know not only are they accepted in this loving community, but that they have an important place here, because my kids also have an important role to play at church. And that brings me to my second reason of why I bring my kids to church: I bring my children to church for you.

Children are the greatest physical proof we have that God is alive and actively creating in the world today. We don't believe in a God who created the world, put it in motion and stepped away. No, we believe in a hands-on God – a God who is active in our lives today. We believe in new life and new creations. Genesis 1:27 tells us, "God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them." God creates new life, babies, in his image. The tiny babies who come up to be baptized remind us that God is here, present, actively walking with us, actively loving us, actively creating us new.

Children also have something to teach us.

They can teach us about acceptance. I witness it on the playground every day. Young kids don't care about the color of someone's skin, their gender, what they're wearing or where they live. They don't see and judge the difference the way adults tend to. Instead they see that we are all equally important to God. Like Horton, they see "a person's a person no matter how small."

We can also learn new ways to experience God thanks to kid's creativity. At yesterday's Lego event we asked people to use Legos to depict their favorite Bible stories. You can see some of

these creations displayed in the narthex today. These creations are an example of the unique and individual way people interpret the stories and experience God.

Children see the world differently than we do. Everything is new to them, and they are constantly learning and asking questions about how and why things work. Don't believe me? Sit in the car with my kid for five minutes. That's how we should be with our faith - constantly asking questions. We shouldn't settle with just what we know. We should strive to learn all we can about ourselves, the world, and God. We should look in awe and wonder with the eyes of a child.

The third reason I bring my kids to church is I believe Jesus wants them to be present. In our Gospel reading today we learn that Jesus said, "Let the children come to me and don't try to stop them!" Jesus wanted the children to be present and he prayed for those who were. As a parent sitting in the pews constantly trying to shush my child, I am like the disciples. Instead, I need to follow Jesus' command. I need to let my own children be welcome at church.

Jesus also takes it one step further. He says, not only are we to openly welcome children, we are supposed to *become like* these children - to have a heart like these children. What does it mean to have the heart of a child? Well I think it's some of things we can learn from children that I spoke of moments ago. It's having a heart that is accepting of others. It's seeing the world in new and creative ways. It's asking questions and having a desire to learn. It's knowing that *you* are proof that God is alive in the world today.

Having children present and around us is how we will learn to become like them – to learn how to have the heart that Jesus wants us to have, so that we can be a part of God's kingdom.

You might be another parent sitting there, listening, and thinking "wow, I'm glad I'm not alone. I'm glad I'm not the only who struggles to get my children to church or to worship with my children." If that's you, I would like to say "thank you." Thank you for bringing your children to church today.

If you're someone who doesn't have kids, or maybe they are grown and gone, you might be wondering, how can I help, or how does this apply to me?

To a stressed out, defeated-feeling parent on a Sunday morning, a simple smile or an, "I'm glad you made it here today" can go a long way.

I would also encourage you to remember that the children around you have something to teach you. Don't see them as a negative distraction. Welcome them. Talk to them. Listen to what they have to say. Help them to try to find the answers to the questions they ask. And remember that Jesus wants you to be like them.

For them, for you, and because it is what Jesus wants - that is why I bring my kids to church.