

The Church Family in Worship

Think, for a moment, of a holiday celebration, as several generations gather in the living room or around a large dining room table. All ages are represented, from the infant and the 2-year-old to the grandfather in poor health. It's a family gathering and a time of joy.

Different people will act differently during the day, even as they gather for the meal. From time to time the infant will squeal, and the toddler will squirm. A teenager might lapse into surly silence, and the elderly may fall asleep and snore at an inopportune time. The family adjusts on the fly throughout the meal: if the squealing or squirming gets to be too much, the youngster is removed from the table until calm is restored. Grandparents nod knowingly, remembering their days of young children and sympathizing with their children. If the elderly fall asleep, the family bears with their weakness with understanding.

That's how the family works: they bear with one another, respect one another and make sure that everyone gets fed.

The congregation is the family of God, gathered in worship to be fed. In His mercy and grace, the Lord provides forgiveness and life for all ages, for He has died for all people no matter their birthday. By His Word and Sacraments, He provides grace and life for all in the Divine Service. Thus, a congregation will have Christians of all ages, from the very young to the elderly; and during the service, different people will react in different ways. Little ones will squirm and squeal, while those advanced in years or poor health may drift to sleep. (We adults in between tend to stay awake and at least *appear* to be attentive. ☺) These different behaviors can become distractions in the service. However, the goal of the service is that everyone be fed with the forgiveness of sins. Therefore, as the family of God, we bear with one another, respect one another and make sure that everyone gets fed.

For instance, children are going to squirm and make noise. Sitting quietly on a hard wooden pew is a learned discipline, not a natural behavior; and it will take the first few years of life for a child to fully adopt this. In the meantime, there will be some noise along the way, and this will be a distraction. If the children become too rambunctious, the parent will want to remove them until calm is restored. This removal should likely involve consequences to teach the importance of avoiding disruption. In fact, a kindergarten teacher once noted that, when a child makes noise and is removed to the nursery, he is taught that he gets to play with toys if he misbehaves. While we do offer a nursery in late service, I'd personally much rather have little ones in worship, receiving grace by the Word, learning the liturgy and the importance of Divine Service.

Here's the tricky part: when is a child too disruptive? The answer will vary from person to person. A good measure is that an occasional squeal or wiggle is expected; but persistent misbehavior should lead to the child's removal (but bring him back ASAP!). That is where it is especially important to bear with one another, respect one another and make sure that everyone gets fed.

It is here also that we give thanks for the Lord's rich and abundant grace. Some models of religion demand that you must be attentive to every step of a service or ritual in order to reap any benefits, but that is not how the Lord operates. Even when parents must spend time educating and training their children, there is still abundant forgiveness to be received. Long before we had kids of our own, I remember a mom saying, "I'd hear the Invocation at the beginning of the service, and it would remind me that Jesus had made me His in Baptism. The next forty minutes were a blur of keeping the children still, and I didn't hear a sermon for a long time. But after the sermon, I'd still receive Jesus' body and blood for forgiveness of sins, and I knew I remained the Lord's child." (Having said this, I recognize that it's easy for me to speak of keeping children quiet in the pew: I've been hiding out safe in the pulpit while my bride has done all the hard work. Many days, she didn't hear a thing—but by means of the Lord's Supper, she was still certain of God's grace.)

Parents have a challenging task in child-rearing, and the 24/7 nature of it includes the worship service. But whether parents are at church or Disneyland, their enjoyment of the setting is always dominated by their attention to the well-being of their children. It behooves all of us to support them in the labor of teaching their children of Jesus and the Divine Service.

The same counsel applies to those in poor health, who simply lack the energy to remain attentive for the length of the service. Those who attend to them may need to shift them a bit should a snore grow too loud; and those gathered around are given to bear with one another, respect one another, and make sure everyone gets fed.

We are, after all, the family of God, gathered at the table of His presence and life. Sin will insinuate itself into any situation, leading to undue squirms, permissiveness, irritation, poor health and more. All of this simply highlights why we are gathered together: we are the family of God, gathered because our Savior comes to bring us the forgiveness of sins.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, the Lord be with you!

—Pastor Pauls