



**A seminary student recounts his experiences on the other side of the pulpit, as he practices being a church-pew parent one Sunday at his fieldwork congregation.**

## Lessons from Owen

*by James H. J. Prophet*

I sit with Mrs. Mitchell and her three boys—the oldest is eight, the next five, and the youngest not quite two years old. (Mr. Mitchell, who’s the seminary organist and a busy musician, plays at a different church this week.)

I end up sitting beside the youngest, Owen. For the first half-hour or so, it’s all about exploring. He crawls up and down the pew, but spends a good deal of time standing looking back toward the Davis family—they’re really fascinating to him. As he squirms up and down, he occasionally bumps into me, or I get a gentle kick or two.

Mrs. Mitchell does her usual refereeing. She feels bad about his squirming, and tries to calm him down a couple of times. It does become difficult to focus on the service at times, but ultimately I don’t mind. How often are humans so unafraid to explore what’s around them, and to lean on you occasionally while doing so? It’s kind of cool watching the little guy stare at people to see what they’re doing. He’s learning, I can tell. Children do learn in the pew. Let me explain to you how I know.

At one point when we’re sitting down for a hymn, I see all the boys pulling out hymnals or sharing with their mum. And they try to sing. Even the littlest one

beside me pulls out a hymnal and opens it to a page. The wrong page, and upside down, but he’s trying, learning, and even in that moment growing in faith. No one can make me believe any different. I was only a couple of years older than him when I used to do the same. Going to church with mum and grandma, the thing I remember most was trying to follow along

in the hymnal and singing. I remember loving to sing as a little child; I remember sitting with family and loving church.

As we finish saying the general prayers together, I open my eyes to Mrs. Mitchell saying, “Excuse me, James. I have to go grab Owen.” The next thing I know, she’s running up to the front, with

Owen about a metre away from the organist, making his final approach.... I bet he thought he was just going up to see dad (even though it’s not his dad playing today).

I find something significant in this little story. Children respond to music, especially to music from the hymnal. Why is it more powerful to have the book in a child’s hand than to have the words on a screen overhead? The words in our hymns are filled with law and gospel and proclaim our salvation in Christ. Does other music focus on sharing the word of God and

---

**The littlest one pulls out a hymnal, opens it to a page—the wrong page, and upside down**

---



The Mitchell family: Callum, David, Paula, Owen and Alastair

Him. Jesus does not deny children the comfort of coming near him. Jesus does not deny children His presence, His love and His Word.

With all this in mind, why should children be removed at any time from worship service? Or denied the comfort of Jesus' presence with those gathered as brothers and sisters in Christ on a Sunday morning? Do children benefit from hearing the sermon? If so, how? Do you believe you come to God by the power of your human knowledge, or by faith through the Holy Spirit? If any part of our relationship with God is based solely on what we think and reason, then by all means keep children from worship! But if we have faith because of what God does for us and how He works in our lives, then by all means let the little children meet Jesus. Do not try to keep them from

proclaiming Christ, or does it only proclaim feelings of the people singing it?

The greater point is this: Even little children have faith, and though they might make noise and move around a lot, they are an important part of worship. The truth is, a child's faith grows even as he or she sits in that pew. Children see people sing and read from hymnals; they try to imitate this. They sit and they watch...always watching, always listening. If they squirm it's because they are trying to experience everything and take it all in.

And they interact with those they sit with.

During the sermon Owen and I exchange books. He gives me one of his little board books, then another. I give one back, and so on. Then he sits. Stops. And looks at that funny-looking guy dressed in the white robe talking up front. Then he hands me another book. And maybe he only stops to listen once or twice (he's mostly concerned with handing me his books), but something's going on here.

The child, in bits and pieces, hears and learns the Word of God.

Someone might say, "Oh, he doesn't understand what he's hearing." Why, then, is it only by the Holy Spirit that we come to God in faith? *That* has nothing to do with knowledge. When the children come to Jesus in Matthew, why do they come? To have Jesus touch them, and to touch Jesus. To sit by him. Maybe Jesus will play with them or tell them a story. But the point is: Jesus does not deny this opportunity for children to learn from

hearing His Word.

"Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away," says 1 Corinthians 13:8. This passage speaks about the same love as in John 3:16. You see, Jesus' death and resurrection is the way God most shows us love. This love never fails. Prophecy, tongues and knowledge fail and pass away, but not God's love for us in Christ.

And if faith comes by God's love, this is something every child understands. A

child enters this world meeting people who love and care for him. Love is something the child can know in God as surely as he can know it in his parents. Children know love by the care and presence of their parents. In the same way, God makes His presence known to children in church, in hearing the Word and witnessing the Sacraments.

Some people turn church into law for their children. Other children, whose parents have made a point of keeping God from them, don't know who God is. Neither approach is right. Going to church is a privilege and a gift. It is a place where the Word of God is heard and where faith grows.

This is gospel, not law. This is a treasure, not a curse. Please don't deny your children the opportunity to grow in faith. If you're a Church Pew Parent, God bless you, and I hope you continue nurturing your children in faith. Let the Holy Spirit work in their hearts on Sunday mornings. Jesus wants them there. He wants us all there.

**James Prophet** is a second-year student at Concordia Lutheran Seminary, Edmonton.

---

## Do children benefit from hearing the sermon? If so, how?

---