

without sharing a context. We're always in the awkward position of someone whose work friends, college buddies, and family members are meeting each other for the first time and comparing notes about how we've variously presented ourselves. Anyone can theoretically avoid any such awkwardness by having perfect integrity in every context. But most of us, lacking perfect sanctification, have sometimes chosen the easier route of just preferring to keep our various worlds separated and compartmentalized.

That is the copout. The awkwardness is a growth opportunity, a lesson in integrity. It is healthier to endure the awkwardness that stems from our own imperfections and weaknesses than to avoid it by compartmentalizing our identity. Sure, it would be best of all to be perfect, and a convention vote to be perfect would probably pass with over 95% of the vote. But given that such a vote would be meaningless, I'd rather keep having these awkward integrity/identity problems that stem from trying to have concord than just relabel lack of concord and lack of integrity the new way of being church.

In the LCMS, we try (and fail, to be sure) not to compartmentalize our identity, which I think is healthy even though it leads to a lot more publicly uncomfortable embarrassments. We try to be the same church in academia and in Sunday school, in New York and in North Dakota, among ancestral Lutherans and unchurched immigrants. It is really

hard — because we are imperfect, and because we fall prey to peer pressure in every direction. And when that happens, what is so wrong with calling people to account, whether it be for breaking the 8th commandment, misrepresenting the synod, teaching falsely, or whatever?

The value of reproof

Proverbs 12.1 says, "Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates reproof is stupid." My mom would probably reprove King Solomon for saying "stupid," and by his own teaching he would have to appreciate her for calling the issue to his attention even if his sinful nature would be more inclined to react to such reproof by reproving her. Which he would soon regret.

I'm very often asked by friends outside the LCMS whether I fear being put up on charges when I write on controversial topics or use a sarcastic or teasing tone with important people. I don't. It never crosses my mind. But my lack of fear does not stem (perhaps it would be more honest to say, "no longer stems") from knowing I'm always right. It stems from not being afraid of being told I'm wrong. Only a fool would rather be wrong than be corrected. And if it turns out I was right, I welcome the opportunity to explain my right beliefs. What's to be afraid of? No harm, no foul. Right?

— by Peter Speckhard, associate editor

Suffer the little children: a contrarian response

by Mark Brown



Pr. Johanna Rehbaum's recent article ["Suffer the little children," *FL* Feb. 2018] is crying out at the contrarian in me. And the author is in the same geographic area as I (well she's in the desirable zip codes, while I'm on the other side of the tracks, but that is just envy, not the contrarian impulse). I'm sure that everybody who read that piece is probably wondering what anybody could have against being nice and winsome to kids in church. But I have two bones to pick with nice and winsome. The first is the overwhelming child worship that is too much with us; the second is the strange lack of grace this often causes.

The child worship brought to mind Rule 5

in Jordan Peterson's *12 Rules for Life: An antidote to chaos*: "Do not let your children do anything that makes you dislike them." That is a pithy way of inducing a frothing at the mouth over the untrue pieties of our naked emperors. We get instructed by such bromides as "there is no excuse for physical punishment" or "let children be children." We get chastised to "let the little children come to me and forbid them not." And even now, in the wake of another school shooting, we are in the midst of being told we should "listen to our children."

Terrible advice

This is all terrible advice, because the world is an adult world. Parents love their children, or we

assume they do. Our correction to our little monsters is much more desirable than what the outside world will do. A child who pays attention, plays well with others, and doesn't whine will have friends and mentors aplenty in an unforgiving world. Clear rules and proper discipline help the child, the family and the larger society. The greatest grace a parent could bestow on a child would be to raise them in the way they should go.

This is hard work, but meaningful. Adults don't help children "figure out how to be in church"; they tell them. We tell them in word and deed. How we act tells our kids much more about our values than what we might say. If we let them treat us as jungle gyms and snack dispensers, we have signaled that nothing of importance or reverence is going on here. If we never bring them to church because it is hard, we have witnessed to emptiness, not the presence of God.

The best construction

But my second bone, the strange lack of grace, is probably the thicker one. The "best construction" on "the shusher" is not that she's a crone, but that she is doing exactly what Pr. Rehbaum recommends in her excellent second suggestion. The lady in the pew behind saw that mother was having trouble with her kids and offered to help. She showed them the proper posture of respect for worship. She did most likely what her mother did for her, and her grandmother had done for her mother, and she did it for the stranger. She also did it knowing full well that she would not be greeted with a polite "thank you" and commiseration about wiggling children, but, well, she would be regarded as a sour wicked witch and blamed for the demise of the church.

Might taking the seat at the end of the pew and offering to show how to use the hymnal be better than shushing? Yes, but they come from the same place even if the former is a much better and kinder expression of discipleship. It goes beyond that simple vignette. It goes to the assumption of why people are in church. Pr. Rehbaum informs us that children "bring their voices, their joy, their wonder, their excitement. They remind us to hope and to love." Yadda, yadda, yadda. In every paragraph there is an expression of privilege. "Look at all the great stuff we bring to this poor benighted place. We

know how to do this best (contrary to the apparent evidence). Don't you want us to come back? If you do, you should treat us well." The essay elevates what we bring, while the true grace of the place has nothing to do with what we bring, but what we find and leave there. When Christ said let the children come to him, it was not so that they could show us the kingdom of God, but so that they might receive it also. So often these days the prideful disciples barring the way to Christ are the parents themselves—often just in their refusal to bestow the grace of how to act and why.

My kids are worse

None of this is to encourage being a jerk, nor to recommend those practices of nursery or "cry room." As I told many a mother and father when my toddlers were at that age (not that long ago), "you've got plenty of cover, my kids are worse." I'm still thankful for the saint who patiently sat with my toddlers and helped my wife in that pew. I look forward to the day when I'm not in the pulpit to return the kindness. And as I tell parents today, "If I can't out-volume a crying baby, that is my failing as a preacher."

Instead, take this contrarian offering as a suggestion that it is long past time to retire the scrooge and the crone. They were always caricatures anyway—caricatures created to salve the consciences of a generation whose heart was elsewhere, and eventually their bodies, souls and children were also. Instead, take it as an encouragement to remember why we call the solemn assembly—not because the world is broken, but because we are, every one of us, from the elder to the nursing child. And it is only here in this gathering that we are all promised Christ. Maybe that is worth some attention and discipline.

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