

October 22, 2017 • Laity Sunday

## “A Celebration of Church and Family”

Sermon by the Candace Johnson and Witney Seibold



*Matthew 19:13-15*

*Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.” And he laid his hands on them and went on his way.*

### **Candace Johnson**

Thank you very much for the opportunity to share this morning. You are probably accustomed to seeing my family sitting very near the front, and while I’m not far from where I’m usually sitting, this vantage point is very different!

Our family’s relationship with FUMC began at preschool in 2015. We enrolled Augie halfway through his last year of preschool, and I spent a lot of time worrying unnecessarily about his transition mid-year. During his first week, it was as if he had been here for years. His teachers even had a nickname for him! As we became better acquainted with the preschool community, it became more and more obvious to me what a loving place this is. I was especially grateful that there was a weekly chapel, because at the time, our family wasn’t attending church anywhere. I felt like we were at least doing something in the way of sharing God with our son.

My husband Tony, and I both work full time, and our family keeps us constantly on the move. While we both grew up going to church and had our own faith in God, we couldn’t seem to get our act together and devote Sunday morning to church. We tried here and there, and despite our best intentions, realized we were the people who would be at church at Christmas and Easter. We couldn’t seem to make anything stick. If someone got sick, or work commitments during the week were draining, it was easy to prioritize sleep and family time.

I knew that at some point – when the kids were older, when our schedules weren’t so crammed – that we would find a church for our family. I knew that I had faith in God, and we would read our children Bible stories and pray before bed... but I knew that ultimately wouldn’t be enough. I kept relegating the idea of “church” to “someday”. It wasn’t until right around Augie’s 5th birthday that something started to happen, and I realized that “someday” needed to be sooner rather than later.

Augie started asking detailed questions about the exact physical location of God, and God’s role in our lives. Sometimes he would look out his bedroom window and ask if God was just on the other side, or if God was indeed in the Sun. He would ask me if God thought about him - I did my best to answer Augie’s questions, and as I did, I realized that even a grown-up who has an understanding grounded in years of Sunday School might struggle with these very same questions. I knew that not having the answers, essentially, about the meaning of life, could lead to a feeling of being lost and empty. I knew that my answers weren’t cutting it and that I needed the kind of foundation that happens when you have a relationship with God and the support of a loving church family.

It seemed serendipitous that around that time, I started to see signs up at preschool about Vacation Bible School.

### Vacation Bible School!

My own memories of VBS came flooding back – the songs, lessons, time with friends. I couldn’t wait to have Augie attend and have a similar experience – learning about God, having fun, and being a part of something. He enjoyed the whole week and would come home singing songs and sharing Bible stories. The last day of VBS, the children perform. It was a joy to see my son participating so enthusiastically. At the conclusion, the leader of VBS addressed the parents in attendance, assuring us that our children had Jesus in their hearts. THIS, I can remember thinking. THIS is what I want. For my kids, and for us as parents.

That week of VBS the conversations about church between me and my husband began changing from the usual, “but we just need a break” “we do so much during the week, how can we handle one more thing?” to “it is time to find a church home” and “let’s give this one a try”

We went to church here as a family for the very first time the Sunday after VBS concluded, and we sat right there INDICATE. I was grateful to have a nursery where Blythe, then too young for Sunday School, could be during service. Augie was ready and waiting to go to Sunday School. When both children were in their respective places, I realized that I would just get to sit and enjoy the service: an inspiring message, beautiful worship music, and a chance to be still and reflect in prayer. I was filled with an overwhelming sense of peace and gratitude – I felt like we were in the right place to begin instilling faith and hope in the heart of my little boy, who was clearly seeking God. I also realized that

simply believing in God was not the same experience as what happens here each Sunday. I was so sure of myself in my thinking that church was for my kids. I needed it too.

Now, two years later, as I watch both of my children walk up each Sunday morning, my heart is full. I can remember counting down the days until Blythe could join her brother in Sunday School. Then when the time came, it was quite a transition to get our normally reserved little girl to separate from us and join her brother and her friends. Just recently, both of our kids mastered the art of sitting still (for the most part), and walking out hand-in-hand together. As for VBS – it is such an anticipated event for both of my kids that our summer travel to visit family is arranged around this one very special week.

So it turned out that going to church every Sunday wasn't as difficult or inconvenient as I imagined that it would be, in fact it is quite the opposite. Being here on Sunday is a moment of calm in our week. As a family we find perspective, guidance, and hope.

Our relationship with this church has helped me grow as a parent and make faith in God a part of our life as a family. There are simple yet foundational things that I have learned here that have become part of our family's life and the focus of our prayers together: the aspiration to live life in a way that shows God's love to others through words and actions – a wonderful daily reminder for children and adults.

When I was preparing what I would share this morning, I reflected on all the ways that we are nurtured as a family here. Prayer was one of the first things that came to my mind. It is such a blessing to receive guidance around something that might seem so simple to us – prayer. But I realized when my kids were 3 and 5 that prayer is something that is learned. At that time, our bedtime prayers were a little all over the place, and I caught myself saying “you should say this” or “you can't ask God for toys” – when it dawned on me that a more simple solution was right in front of me: we could model our prayer at home after the partner prayer that my kids were used to doing here at church each Sunday. Because both kids were accustomed to this format, prayer at home became more meaningful, and even my 3-year-old could participate.

Both my husband and I grew up going to church, and knew that the choice to make this our church home meant supporting it the best way we could. Choosing to come to church and choosing to tithe were decisions that came hand in hand. What I didn't realize was that we would also be instilling this value in our children at such a young age. The tithing envelopes are very significant to our family. Every Sunday, Augie brings offering (from his own earnings) for both himself and Blythe. He fills out the envelope for both of them so that they can give during the lesson. This could be called a habit or a value – I think it is both, and it is very meaningful for both of my children.

This church supports our entire family. We've gone through some challenges with our health, and recently, my husband was in a bicycle accident. When a card comes in the mail, or someone sends an email, or asks about us after church – we feel that love profoundly. Sometimes our challenges are more internal: a tough decision about a job or a parenting hurdle. I hold tightly to these types of issues, and try my very best to keep life predictable and under control. I see the Let's Connect Cards in the pew isle every Sunday, inviting me to literally let go... when I reached a point with a particular issue I had been struggling with, I knew that I could ask for prayer. I grabbed a card and filled it out. As I wrote, then when I let the card go, I was not surprised to find tears in my eyes. The tears were not from sadness or frustration, but from relief. It is reassuring to know that when I've held on to something for too long, I have a way to symbolically let it go and give it to God. As a parent and wife, a lot has come my way, and I'm grateful to be able to ask for prayer and know that someone will check in with me to ask how it's going.

This church has given us a community: my children are greeted by Sunday School teachers, who know and love them. When I talk with the teachers, I realize that they are making the kinds of observations about my children that someone would only be able to make if they took the time and payed close attention. At Messy Church we get to spend time with other families and their kids. I love participating in the lesson with activities, projects, and praise. At this most recent Messy Church, we were gearing up to sing “This Little Light of Mine” and I was about to lean down and help Blythe with her “Light” – and she already had it up. Such a small thing, but I knew that she had learned that here and along with her Light, so much more. At the conclusion of Messy Church, we sit down for a meal together. As any parent knows, a lot goes into even the most simple meal, and dining can be hectic. I feel it is one of the ultimate gestures of caring and kindness that we get to enjoy an evening of worship and celebration, and then sit down to a meal that someone else has lovingly made for us.

First United Methodist Church has become an important part of our life as a family. I would have never imagined that enrolling Augie halfway through his last year of preschool would have lead to this kind of relationship. I'm so grateful for family ministry – and to all the caring people who are devoted to Augie and Blythe, and to us as parents. We are blessed to call this our church home.

## **Witney Seibold**

My son, Henry, was born in April of 2015. When he was only six weeks old, my wife, Angie, and I asked that he be baptized right over there. In the ensuing two and a half years, Henry has not only spent Sunday mornings playing in the church nursery (where he is right now, likely obsessing over his favorite car toys), but has been enrolled in the church's preschool. Henry and I started attending the toddler-and-me program where he was only one of two boys, both named Henry; having the same name as a classmate was a problem my wife and I were staunchly hoping to avoid when we selected his name, and we were contradicted by fate on day one. Henry is currently going to preschool four days a week down at the bottom of the ramp. A ramp which, he has discovered, is perhaps one of the most amazing features of this church; someday I trust he will know the bliss of running down that ramp in socks following an MYF sleepover.

I was born in August of 1978 and I, too, was baptized right over there. I was a part of this church from early on, having played in the nursery myself. I attended Sunday school here, eventually joined MYF, and took part in the children's choirs, the youth choir, and the youth handbell choir. I performed musicals and Christmas concerts here as part of the youth choir, went Christmas caroling, attended my fair share of lock-ins, and, yes, discovered the joys of running down that ramp in socks. I was a noisy goofball, but I had a wonderful time. I was confirmed here, and still have the youth Bible that was issued to me. And not least of these, I was married here one year ago tomorrow.

Additionally, I was a Boy Scout here. We regularly met in the room under the church's kitchen so that I and my peers could learn non-Scout-issue camp songs and about how punctured nitro tanks could propel a pinewood derby racer back up its ramp. Worry not. We incurred no property damage. I have been attending service here as an adult, attending service when my horrific late-night work hours left me with only a small amount of fatigue.

My sister was born in 1975. She was baptized right over there, wearing a dress, a garment she notoriously hated. She was my guide through much of the social ranks of the youth programs around here. Although, as she was three years my senior, was far cooler than I.

My mother Louäna was born in 1950, and was married to my father in this church in 1968. My mother was a busy bee here, having taken part in coffee hours, quilt ministries, medical services, and myriad, myriad other programs that the church has been involved in. She made some of the hangings you still see on the pulpit, lectern, and front table there. She was a vocal and passionate presence in this church, and I will always admire her for working so hard to get the coffee hour ministry to stop mixing that syrupy red fruit punch. My father, Bob, meanwhile, was a part of the church choir for several years, and still, at age 77, frequently states his fondness of Jim Smith. My aunt Caprice and uncle Allan are still, to this very day, aiding the church. I don't have to tell you their stories; you can ask them. They're likely up there in the balcony. They can also tell you about my cousins who will occasionally come here, and my second cousins as well.

My grandmother Florence was born in 1908, and was one of the original members of this church when it first moved to its new location on 11th street. She was active in the choir for decades, and guided us, her brood, through this church that was so dear to her. She opened the door to you, this family, and we have been residing in here ever since. My grandmother was a polite, gentle, yet stern woman who, to me, was one the central fixtures of this community. The zimbels you occasionally hear during the more glorious hymns were installed at her behest. My grandmother had her memorial service held here.

I don't know the exact year my great, great grandfather, Augustus Phillips George was born – Caprice might have that information written down somewhere – but he, too, was a part of the Methodist community. He was a circuit-riding minister in the late years of the 19th century, traversing some of the more remote locations in Kansas, preaching and giving sermons to the locals. As a tribute to pastor Augustus, many of his parishioners from all over the state assembled a quilt in his honor. That quilt hung on my grandmother's wall for many years. The quilt was so enormous, that it, when framed, had to be lifted into my grandmother's apartment via crane. When she passed, that quilt was brought back to Kansas where the descendants of Augustus' flock can still look at it.

My own family and the church family are essentially intertwined, the two families functioning in tandem. My family has, like so many families, had its dramas, in-jokes, and intricate, amusing history. My own son, only 2 ½ is now also part of that history, and I'm happy to have him also be a part of this family.