

In praise of unruly children in church

Sometimes they're the only sign of life amid our solemn boringness.

by [Phil Christman](#) in the [April 2025](#) issue

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*Century* illustration

Churchgoing is, except for all the other parts, the part of being a Christian that I am worst at. I go, but I don't like it as much as you're supposed to. I didn't like it as a kid, when it involved company that I had not selected for myself and a lot of bad music, and I only like it somewhat better as an adult, when it involves company I *have* selected and, for the most part, better music. No doubt this is my fault—laziness intensified by ADHD or some other as yet ill-understood cluster of symptoms, but still my fault, one so characteristic that without it I would have trouble recognizing myself.

Except for the handful of years when I have been blessed with truly exceptional priests, people I enjoyed listening to and counted as friends, I would almost always rather read theology and take a walk in the woods. Whatever “religious emotions” are, if I have them at all, those are the circumstances in which I'm likeliest to have them.

No doubt I will outgrow my lack of appreciation for church as such, in this world or the next. Nevertheless, my indisposition has given me—as indispositions sometimes do—a unique vantage point, one that allows me to see particular truths with special clarity while blocking out others of equal pertinence. Here is one of those truths: Unruly children are a gift from God. Kids who can't behave in church are a sign that God has not yet abandoned us.

Why are misbehaving children such an important part of church to me—so much so that I instinctively shy away from congregations where the kids are too quiet? I'm sure that it's partly just identification. Sometimes the people who struggle the most with Christianity in their youth, who resist it as a young child runs from a hairbrush, are the ones who find that they can't abandon that struggle, and such was my case. I was forever being shushed, or reprovved, or made to sit in the corner during church school. Sometimes I got in fights with other kids, and I'd get kicked out, made to await punishment in some office while someone alerted my parents to yet another of my failures to behave. So when some kid kicks the pew I'm sitting in, I think, *Dude, I get where you're coming from*. Game recognizes game.

I think it runs deeper than this, though. The most obvious fact about children is that they aren't used to any of this stuff, this being alive. They still get how weird it all is; they haven't been hypnotized by repetition yet. Babies' faces, which sort of glimmer between expressions without settling on one, are as close as the human face gets to

reflecting the prism of being. Older children have moved past this stage, but we see some of that same discomposed quality in their reaction to church, with its weird rituals—low church or high church, it's all ritual, and it's all weird—and its insane claims.

In a sufficiently torpid service—one in which the leaders are running on sheer willpower, as I often am simply in showing up—the ill-behaved kids can be the only sign of life. They are God's simultaneous recognition of and dissent from our solemn boringness. We intone our prosy liturgical responses, from which the poetry and beauty have often been edited out for the sake of "accessibility" or "relevance," and God pulls a face. We warble our way through that hymn that sounds like a rip-off of the big number from *Les Misérables*, and the Holy Spirit blows a raspberry. The liturgy isn't a dispensable part of this process; we create a structure so that the children can blow it up. You build the altar here so the fire can come down over there, as Charles Williams once said.

Parents whose babies cry too loud, overwhelmed caregivers whose charges can't stop whispering or squirming or making faces, are the bearers of an uplifting message—although I understand why they can't, in the moment, feel as though this is true. Not when the diaper already smells full, or when churchgoers more officious than I am are turning to shush the toddler or smile passive-aggressively at the adults. Not when the parents have to worry that other congregants will mutter about their parenting, or say something vaguely racist about "cultural differences in childrearing," or the other nonsense parents are subjected to at church. Mary and Joseph probably felt pretty stressed out most of the time, too. Carrying the embodied Word is a lousy job; it's easier to just flap your jaw for a living, as I do. The rest of us should show these beleaguered accompanying grown-ups a little respect. Yes, even that one lady—the one you're thinking of as the exception to my argument.

Several years and several churches ago, something happened that cinched this point for me. Our church had done a canvass of the working-class neighborhood in which it was situated, and a large group of unattended kids, with their (overwhelmed and overworked) parents' permission, had started attending. (We may have bribed the children a bit with coloring books and bowls of cereal.) The little knot of people who I sat with ended up being the default babysitters for this group of kids, whose ages ranged from four to 11.

One week, as our rector repeated, for the umpteenth time, the words that accompany the Eucharist, when she got to “He died,” a four-year-old face turned to me, full of shock and horror, and said: “He what?!”

It’s one of the only times I’ve seen someone begin to register what we do and say in church, in all its world-overturning beauty and terror, while sitting in church. It’s more appropriate than anything I’ve ever said in that setting, and more fitting than the inadequate words of comfort that I offered this kid, which were something like, “Yes, he died. But then he came alive again, because he was God. It’s wild!” I was, in that instant, a dull, responsible adult, trying to shovel as much wholesome theological content into my words as I could. I was trying to be adequate to the moment, because that’s what inadequate people do.

She has probably forgotten me and whatever it was I said. But I hope she never forgets what *she* said. He died. He what?! He rose again. He what?! He loves us, he loves her, he loves me, he loves you.

He what?!