

Good morning, I'm Cassie McConkey, Director of Children, Family and Youth here at First Presbyterian Church.

I grew up in the church, but church was more of a memory than it was a formative experience. My church was similar to this one, beautiful stained glass, my grandma sitting next to me in the pew, the Lord's Prayer and benediction every Sunday, and...donuts, yes, sorry Rick, I remember the donuts more than the sermons. It wasn't until I met a few friends my freshman year of high school, that church meant something different.

A group of my friends (one of them being my future husband, Josh) invited me to go to youth group. We all went faithfully every Wednesday night and occasionally I would go on Sunday mornings. We went to Youth for Christ every Monday, and took every chance we could to get out of the house to go to a youth group event. Ok, I'll admit, maybe part of the reason we went to so many church activities was because Josh was forever grounded, and the only thing he was allowed to do was go to church events. But no doubt, this was all a part of God's plan.

Although I didn't see it at the time, I finally had a place to belong. And I had adults who believed in me. As I look back, I see how much this affected my faith and my future.

This is true:

If every child has a place to belong and someone to believe in them, that WILL dramatically affect their faith and their future.

Let me share a familiar Scripture.

¹³ People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴ When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. ¹⁵ Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." ¹⁶ And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.

Mark 10:13-16

I think most of us love this text. We actually talked about this in Sunday School just a few weeks ago. It comes late in Jesus' ministry. He is no doubt weary from serving an endless series of needs – people who need healing, people coming with questions, enduring the criticism of the Pharisees. So when some parents bring their children to Jesus, the disciples try to shoo them away. In that day, children are neither to be seen nor heard. But Jesus loves the children, just like He loves each of us. He's showing everyone how much He values children. So He welcomes them with open arms, modeling the love

we are to have for our children and youth, and the concern we're to have that they meet Jesus themselves.

Today in our country, half of "church kids" are walking away from their faith in college, and closer to home, over 50% of our students are walking away from FPCC after confirmation. These are big problems. But big problems don't necessarily take big solutions. The biggest differences don't take something big at all. Lets think small.

What you do for a few will always have more impact than what you do for many. Let me say that again, what you do for a few will always have more impact than what you do for many.

Think about it:

Reading to your children before they go to bed – they experience your closeness and learn to love stories.

A coach mentors his players, but a basketball team may have a coach and three or four assistants for 12 players; that's so that each player can get 1-1 attention

Jesus chooses just 12 disciples and scholars say that he spends 50 percent of His time with just these chosen twelve. Why? So that He can pour His life into them fully!

Listen to this account of Jesus calling the disciples from Mark 3 verses 13-19:

Jesus Appoints the Twelve

¹³ Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. ¹⁴ He appointed twelve^[a] that they might be **with** him and that he might send them out to preach ¹⁵ and to have authority to drive out demons. ¹⁶ These are the twelve he appointed: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter), ¹⁷ James son of Zebedee and his brother John (to them he gave the name Boanerges, which means "sons of thunder"),¹⁸ Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot ¹⁹ and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

The key word in this text is the word "with." "He appointed twelve – designating them apostles – that they might be with him. Jesus knows that as we develop deep relationships, as we live life together, as we struggle with issues and questions together, faith and trust is created.

You see, children and youth want to belong. They want someone to trust; they need a mentor and an example; they need someone to answer their questions; they need others in addition to their parents to love them and come along side of them.

I can't do that for every child. I cannot even do that for many children. However I can do it for a few, and so can you.

VIDEO CLIP: Say Yes to Messy

Messy. That's what ministry is, it's messy.

Let me share with you what ministry is to one of our current Small Group Leaders.

She says, it's an eight year old child running across Westminster to give me a hug

It's comforting scared children who have just arrived in the USA and then rejoicing when they smile for the first time

It's endless reports of losing a tooth

It's witnessing an adoption of two beautiful children

It's pure happiness about two donut holes and a cup of water

It's being asked if I forgot to brush my hair

It's asking a child to pray over snack and hearing, "God is great. God is good. Thank you God for my food."

It's reading a passage of scripture for the 100th time in my life but seeing it through fresh eyes

It's spelling "heaven" for the 10th time in five minutes

It's countless visits to the bathroom

It's wiping away tears as grandparents are lost

It's smiling when each child wants to be the one to hold my hand or walk next to me

It's trying not to laugh when I hear the sad story of a student who got new pants when he really wanted new shoes

It's being told I'm not a very good artist

It's kids who believe I was actually around at the time of Jesus

Ministry isn't memorizing the ten commandments. It's memorizing the ten commandments with your few, and then one day having a student come up to you and ask for your help wrestling through forgiveness because they broke one of those rules.

Ministry isn't listening to a teacher read the Bible and tell you what you shouldn't do. It's when one of your few, does something wrong and calls you to talk about it.

Ministry isn't every student facing the teacher, willing and ready to learn and soak up all the knowledge that we're about to impart to them.

What effective ministry is, is building relationships with a group of students until that one day, you get a smile out of that one kid, which brings you more joy that you could have ever imagined.

That's why small groups are so important. And that's why Small Group Leaders are so important.

It makes sense doesn't it? Jesus was a Small Group Leader. He performed His ministry in close relationships, connecting with the 12 disciples so that when the time came, they were ready for all that would ensue when He wasn't there anymore.

And isn't it the truth, that we, as parents, grandparents, and Small Group Leaders aren't always there. Our little ones *will* grow up, and they *will* go off into the world without us. It's not *if*, it's *when*.

According to the CDC, 11% of all alcohol in the United States is consumed by 12-20 year olds.

And, in 2012 the National Survey on Drug Use and Health reported that 24% of youth aged 12 to 20 years drink alcohol and 15% reported binge drinking.

37% doubt the existence of God.

And, 8 out of 10 teens do not think going to church is important.

Recent research out of Fuller Theological Seminary examined the long-term faith of teenagers, and the results were compiled in the book "Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids" by Kara E. Powell and Chap Clark. In their study, they followed hundreds of committed Christ followers from high school all the way through college. They found that about 60 percent of students will walk away from their faith and many of them will not return. These are not the fringe kids. These are the kids who were once at the core of the church and their youth group.

However, others had what they termed a "sticky" faith. When they were faced with real life hardships, temptations, and questions, their faith remained as firm as ever. But what was different about what those students experienced?

They found that:

Students with sticky faith are surrounded by an intergenerational faith community.

Look around. We are poised in a unique community, in a unique church filled with inspiring stories and history. This can be a great gift to our children and youth.

Students that developed sticky faith are guided through their faith journey by a parent, and other trusted adults.

It isn't WHAT they learn in church that helps them hold onto faith, it is HOW they learn it. If they have strong relationships with their parents and a few Small Group Leaders throughout their childhood, they are able to struggle with life, ask questions, and process their doubts.

Students with sticky faith are raised in a faith culture that emphasizes a relationship with Christ as opposed to an adherence to a set of rules.

We want our students to come to know Jesus as a dependable friend, as their confidant, as the one who loves them no matter what.

So lets not just preach the rules.

Our students face tensions. They're in the world but we don't want them to be of the world. There's a tension between the truths of scripture, and how we live in the world. Our students deal with it every day. We deal with it every day.

So as a Small Group Leader, you're placed right in the middle of that tension. Tension such as:

The Bible is All True, sure, but Everything true about life is not in the Bible.

The Bible talks about treating our bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit, but what does that mean when we begin to date. With whom are they going to wrestle with that tension? A parent, maybe. Their peers, surely. Their Small Group at church, that's what we pray for.

Simply teaching the Bible without applications can work against us. We must help our students apply the Bible's teachings to their real life experiences, and be there when it happens.

Trust leads to a stronger faith, and you know what, DOUBT leads to a stronger faith. Doubt leads to a stronger faith.

If we do not allow kids in middle school to process their doubts, and to ask the hard questions, then they will never own their own faith. And a huge factor in a middle schooler actually processing their doubts, is for them to have a stable/solid leader within the church community with whom they can share, they can trust, who is working along side parents.

You should enjoy going to church. But you know what, you should enjoy living in the world too.

There is a tension between being in the world, and not being of the world. We want to protect our children and our youth; we don't want them exposed to negative influences; we want to monitor their friends and with whom they're spending time. We want them to live the eternal truths of God's word. But everyday they live in the world; they're exposed to the good and the bad, to positive and negative influences. As we stick close to them, as we love them when they make mistakes, as we help them process what they're seeing and experiencing, we prepare them for the time they'll be on their own.

Some of you know my right hand lady, Joyce Witter. Her daughter Lynn was in her senior year of high school, and attending our church, when her father suddenly died of _____. She was devastated, the whole family was. But she was able to turn to her Small Group Leaders ___ and ___ Shoemaker. She was able to talk to them about things that she wasn't able to talk to her mom about. The difficult questions, why would God allow this to happen? Is there a God? And why does this hurt so much? Lynn stayed in touch with the Shoemakers and they attended her graduation, her wedding, and they're still Facebook friends.

That is real life tension.

We can sit in a room and teach the Bible. But when we sit in a room, dissect the Bible with our students week after week, while learning their stories and being present in their lives, we're more of a force.

When they're wrestling with their questions and their doubts, and we're walking through that with them instead of judging them, we're more of a force.

When life is presenting them with a really hard situation, and we reach out, we're more of a force.

What force are we talking about?

I want you to take that orange rubber band that you have. Imagine crumpling it up and throwing it at your neighbor. Not so powerful huh?

Ok, lets try something different. Imagine Pulling back on that rubber band, stretch it all the way back, ALL THE WAY BACK (you can play this for the humor) now point it...just kidding! Don't wound your neighbor! It has more power, right?

When we connect students with adults that are believers, foster a relationship of trust by being present, and add in a really difficult life experience, the force of that relationship will carry the student's faith farther than you will imagine. Now that's powerful!

One of the most challenging texts in the Bible is Judges 2:10. The Israelites have entered the Promised Land, and are enjoying the fruits of freedom. Their wilderness wandering is past. But now they grow complacent, especially with regard to their children, so listen to what happens.

¹⁰ After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel.

So the Israelite children do not know who created the heavens and the earth; they don't know of the faith of Abraham and Sarah, or how God split the waters of the Red Sea to free them from the captivity of Pharaoh. They don't know the ten commandments or how God provided for them every single day for forty years as they wander in the wilderness. They don't know who they are or Whose they are. That is something we cannot ever allow to happen.

Our ministry to our children and youth is messy; it is challenging; it will challenge our own faith because we'll be asked hard questions. But this ministry is filled with joy and laughter and adventure and the glorious wonder of helping to shape young lives. Abraham Lincoln once said,

“One day our children will be our teachers; they will preach in our pulpits; they will be mother and fathers; they will be our judges, our businessmen, our farmers, our politicians, and our leaders. They will make every decision; they will set the course of our history; everything to which we aspire, every moral value we hold dear, every goal we set, will depend on them. Our future will depend on them.”

So what do you say? Do you say Yes to messy? To drama? To laughter? Do you say Yes to questions? To adventure? Do you say Yes to the future?

By saying yes you are ultimately saying Yes to God, Yes to making an eternal difference, Yes to being His hands and feet, Yes to giving Your time to help teach a generation to serve a world in need. Yes to being like Jesus who said, "Let the children come to me."

There are over 150 specific ways to get involved with children and youth just in our church. And we are looking for our 12. Twelve Small Group Leaders that will say Yes to the tension that is Biblical truths merging with the real lives of students.

Will you say Yes?