

Play "Forgive Us" Video

That video likely stirred something inside of most of us. Maybe you're a young person who has been directly hurt by something or by someone in our church or at a different church. I want to say to you, I'm sorry for any part of our story that we've kept from you out of our own insecurities. Chances are there are some adults here well into their 30's, 40's, 50's or beyond that were hurt in their youth and have been waiting their whole life for an apology, like the one in the video, if that's your story, I'm so sorry.

Some of you may feel a little perplexed, apologize to our young people? Why? I mean don't we devote a significant amount of resources to our programming for children and youth?

We do, yes. Yet, things are sometimes more complex than what they appear to be. A member of our church recently shared with me a practice that she lives out to help her remember that sometimes there are hidden things going on under the surface that we may not yet be able to see. Things that don't have simple solutions.

"For years our kitchen cabinet doors, when opened, have fluttered with newspaper clippings taped to the inside. They are obituaries of family and friends. They are there to honor the "hyphen"; the years between birth and death.

Seeing their names during the daily activities of setting the table or putting away dishes triggers memories. Dear faces flash across my mind's eye. Years of shared experiences or family connections flood back as if they had occurred only last week.

This tradition began decades ago. There was a young man who rode his bike to work. His route regularly took him past my work location. He always waved and most of the time was smiling. One day, out of the blue, he was gone. The news reported that his death was a result of suicide.

I felt shocked, extremely sad and a little betrayed by those smiles and waves. Could it be, that someone outwardly seeming "settled and okay", was actually in pain and lonely, with no one to turn to in time of need?

These thoughts have stayed with me over the years. I don't always remember to act on this prompting, but thinking about "Kelly" does help me at times to be more intentional about recognizing and valuing individual people."

Her line, "Could it be, that someone outwardly seeming "settled and okay", was actually in pain and lonely, with no one to turn to in time of need?" instantly had me thinking about our children and youth.

Currently we have over 418 kids whose families call Faith home. Far more important than that number, though, are the names behind the number. We included an insert in your bulletin so that we could share their names with you. Take a second to look at all the names on this list. Read them, think about the ones that you recognize. If you don't know any of the children here at Faith think about the children in your life that you do know.

Could it be, that one of our kids, one of the names on the sheet of paper in your hand, who outwardly seems settled and okay is actually in pain and lonely, with no one to turn to in their time of need?

Though I wish this was a rhetorical question, we know the answer, it's yes. There are children and youth in our midst that are in pain and struggling with a wide variety of things and they don't always know where to turn.

Let me ask another question. Have you ever been in a situation and you instantly knew that you were in over your head? This happened to me four weeks ago at our high school youth group. We had partnered with a local organization, Stand Up For Your Sister. We separated our guys and girls and handed out anonymous surveys that asked every hard question you could think to ask. Questions like:

Do you regularly view pornography?

Have you ever intentionally hurt yourself?

Have you ever had suicidal thoughts?

Do you ever question your salvation?

Do you ever struggle to believe in the promises of God for your life?

Question by question our youth marked yes or no. The only sounds in the room were pens and pencils scratching the papers circling yes or no. The tension was palpable.

We collected all the surveys. No names, completely anonymous. We shuffled them. We passed them back out.

Question by question we read through the survey. If the anonymous survey in your hand was marked yes for that question you stood up to represent the person who filled it out. While remaining anonymous, our kids were able to be seen.

After standing up for each other I shared my testimony with the guys and one of the leaders of Stand Up For Your Sister shared her's with the girls. Then our kids had a chance to share about these topics in their groups. Share they did. Things were shared that had never been spoken out loud. Burdens that our youth had carried alone were now being shared with their group leaders and their peers.

We recollected the surveys and compiled the data and I want to share a few of the things that we learned with you. Before I do that, a few housekeeping rules... To parents of high school students, what I am about to share may set off all kind of alarms for you. Don't go figuratively breaking down the door on these subjects. If your high schooler is listening today maybe you lead with, "What did you think about what Chris had to say?" Then see where the conversation goes.

To our young people, as I share some of these stats there is going to be a temptation to feel shame and judgement. You have nothing to be ashamed of! In fact, if anything, we owe you a deep level of gratitude. There are grown adults in this room that are going to hear that statistics that I am about to share and a piece of them is going to come alive because they are going to see that they are not alone. Everything you struggle with, we struggle with too!

Finally, it's really easy to tune out statistics because we don't always have a high level of confidence that they actually represent our situation. These statistics are ours. They represents our kids. They represent our church. They represent our community. We had about 40 students take those surveys here are some of the things we learned...

Do you struggle with self-worth?
81%

Do you ever question your salvation?
65%

Do you ever struggle to believe in the promises of God for your life?
81%

Have you ever had suicidal thoughts?
46%

Do you keep these struggles to yourself to make yourself look like a better follower of Jesus?
51%

Are any of these issues keeping you from following Jesus with your everything?
73%

A month later, the adrenaline from that event has worn off and I catch myself wondering... How do we change? How do we become a church where we are all convinced it's okay to talk about the hard things in life and not hide them? How do we help each other and our youth live in greater freedom than these numbers currently reflect?

In Mark 9 starting in verse 33 we come to a passage that begins with the disciples measuring themselves up against each other.

"And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?" But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. "

Mark 9:33-34, ESV

At this point the disciples had seen Jesus do numerous incredible things. He'd fed thousands with a boy's lunch, he'd walked on water, he'd calmed a storm at sea, he had healed all kinds of diseases and he taught with great authority. Peter had already declared that Jesus was indeed the Christ. Yet, up to this point, the fact that humility is a critical part of following Jesus had still not fully registered with the disciples.

On the way to Capernaum the disciples are trying to work out the pecking order. Of course Jesus was number one. But who was number two? The disciples silence is indicative of the fact that they knew this argument was not a good one to be had but their pride got in the way. So what does Jesus do?

"And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all."

Mark 9:35

Jesus tells his disciples, "If you want to be first, be last. Serve everyone." The disciples wanted a title, captain, right hand man something that would denote their worth. Yet, if they wanted to be the greatest what they really needed to do was choose humility over status. Jesus lived out ultimate humility! One of his last interactions with his disciples would have been him washing their feet. Nice roads weren't a common thing back then. Animals shared the roads. At the end of a day's journey your feet, having only been covered by sandals, would need to be cleaned. Not a fun job. It was typically a job that was designated for a slave or servant. Jesus didn't care about the details of the act. He cared about his disciples. That's what it looks like to be the last of all and servant of all.

36 And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, 37 "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me."

Mark 9:36-37, ESV

Following his point about humility, Jesus scoops up a child and says to his disciples, he who receives one such child in my name receives me, and not just me, but also God the Father who sent me. He is telling his disciples when you welcome a child you welcome me.

The fact that Jesus took up a child is significant here. We don't know the age of the child but for those of you with young kids in your lives think about them for a second. I have four kids, a seven year old, a four year old, a three year old and a six month old. I don't exactly "take my seven year old up in my arms". When he comes at me, he's coming like a linebacker and he doesn't typically come up, no, I typically go down. My four year old occasionally will jump into my arms. My three year old, though, loves being carried by daddy. That's what I picture going on in this passage. A preschooler being taken up in Jesus's arms with the message being communicated to everyone but specifically to that child you belong here. You belong with me.

The disciples were interested in being the greatest. I am not particularly interested in figuring out who is the greatest in this room. What does interest me, is figuring out how we, all of us, can collectively be the greatest church for our children.

The answer to that question comes in two parts. First, what can each of us individually do to welcome children as Jesus did? Second, what can we do, as a church, to provide an environment where the faith of our children can thrive?

Individually, I think we all need to notice the children in our sphere of influence and welcome them into our lives as Jesus did. Going back to my speculation that Jesus was scooping up a preschooler... I will put my fourteen years of experience, in this job, on the line and wager to bet Jesus had spent significant time building a relationship with that child. Most preschoolers will not let any old stranger scoop them up. Even if you are Jesus. With my children, and most others that's a right you have to earn. It could be children in our life groups. It could be children who live next door. I could be nieces and nephews. Anywhere your life commonly intersects with children take note of them. Get down on their level when you talk to them. Take mental notes about the things they like and follow up on those things the next time you see them. Invite them to the table.

Growing up, my family played pitch at Easter, Thanksgiving and Christmas. Thirteen point for all who have a similar tradition. For years I hung off the sides of the card tables taking it all in. I'll never forget the day I was finally invited to the table. I had watched for so long I had developed strategies and could compete right along any of the adults. Looking back, I wish I had been invited to the table much sooner. I think about the memories that we all missed out on.

The second thing I think we need to do is live our lives honestly in front of the children in our sphere of influence. I come back to the question from our survey, "Do you keep these struggles to yourself to make yourself look like a better follower of Jesus?" To which 51% of our youth said yes. I think we as adults are at fault for that. "Hey, how are you doing? I'm doing good. Great! How about you? Yeah I'm doing good too. Busy, but good. That's good!" We can be so shallow.

I've been pushing our high schoolers to be very vulnerable with each other. How dare we not be willing to do the same? Here's a fresh example of how that might work. My wife and I were on a date a few weeks ago. We have a book of lists that we return to occasionally as a way to spark meaningful conversation. We were looking at our bucket list list.... I personally don't have a great desire to travel to exotic places or do crazy things. The two things that came to mind were I wanted to walk my daughters down the aisle on their wedding day, Lord willing, and I want to hold all my grandchildren, Lord willing.

I had a Drs appointment recently and my blood pressure is high, my family has some history of heart disease and I have about fifty extra pounds that I need to lose. And while I want to be healthy I keep returning to fast food over and over and neglecting the exercise I keep saying I want to do. I am realizing I have a self control issue and to be honest, I am not super confident in my ability to change those habits. There is a part of me that is scared. Scared that my poor decisions will take precious moments away from my future.

When the kids in our lives see us working through our issues like that, they get to learn from our mistakes and I think it's really good for us personally. I am not saying share everything without using your best judgment about what is appropriate and what is not. I am saying you should have a circle of people in your life that you are honest with, when appropriate, that should include young people. When we only share our triumphs we're sharing a faith that may not feel applicable when life gets hard.

Beyond how we each individually receive kids and youth into our lives, we, as a church, have a corporate responsibility to make sure they realize we know they are every bit as important to this body of Christ as we ourselves are. We do that through our programs. Both the programs that serve our children directly and all the others where we can have them serve along side of us.

In our programs for our kids and youth we've recently committed to pursuing two things with everything we've got.

First, we want to make sure every one of our children has a person who believes in them. We're in the process of retooling our programs to put relationships at the center of our structures. We want every one of our kids and youth to have an ally here at Faith that is not related to them. A person who can enter into their story with humility and shine a bright light on all that God has done for them and promised to them.

On the back of your bulletin insert you'll see the names of 137 incredible people who have said, "God, I will welcome your children, in your name." As you've heard me talking about the Next Generation today many of you likely felt a stirring inside. A desire to get involved. A heartache for the paths our young people have to walk. Maybe some of you heard your own story being talked about and you'd like to show up in the lives of a few kids or youth and help them live a better story. What if one day one of our kids is telling their story and your name is at the center of it because God chose to work thorough you and you were willing to say, "Here I am God, send me!"

On the back of the connection card, in the seat in front of you, there is a box to check for more information about serving in the NextGen Ministries here at Faith. If you feel any kind of tug towards joining us we'd LOVE to have you fill this card out and place it in the offering bag when they are passed here in a few minutes. We need 68 people to say yes for the summer and 86 to say yes for the fall!

Our core needs include needs for leaders to lead our small groups at every phase (preschool, elementary, middle school and high school) and musicians to help lead our children in worship. Again, if you feel God tugging on your heart the communication card in the back of the seat in front of you is the way to respond.

The second thing we want our kids to have is a place to belong. There are two components to this one.

First is a physical location. This building has served us well and continues to do so. But we are running out of room. Our preschool and elementary ministries have almost doubled in size over the last four years. In addition to growth, the kind of ministry we aspire to do in the middle school and high school phases requires a different kind of building. As many of you know we're in the midst of a building campaign called Making Room 2. The building plans for Making Room 2 were designed to help us care for the kids that are already here and reach out to our community in new and exciting ways. It was designed with a focus on relationships more than maximum seating. For some of you coming along side the Next Generation may involve giving generously to help ensure our kids have a physical place to belong.

Fulfilling our desire to be a place where children feel like they belong cannot be accomplished with a building alone though. It also requires our church culture to reflect the things Jesus taught in Mark 9. It will require our young people to look out for those sitting alone and welcome them into your circles. It will require us adults to get past the, "Well back in my day..." mentality. It will require us to be humble and to love because it is in the context of relationships that we experience true belonging.

A place to belong. A person who believes. I believe with all my heart that we, as a church, need to sacrifice our time and our resources to provide these two things for the Next Generation. Not just for a few of our kids. For all of them. Join me in praying that Faith could be a place where all of our kids feel safe, a place that fosters a God centered self-worth, a place that is safe to live honestly without fear of judgement, a place that feels like home.