

# Shift to Multigenerational Community

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     My name is Erin Byrne and I am the director of family ministry here. I lead the Table Kids program and also work to support families as well. I want to start today by telling you all about someone I love called Mrs. Taylor.

But first, I want to give you some quick context about myself. I moved to Seattle when I was eight days old. I'm in Washington, Virginia, but my dad got a job in the Seattle area right before I was born.

So as very new parents, my parents moved across the country to a place where they really didn't know anyone. Pretty soon, my mom was working nights and a year later, my sister was born. So in my early childhood, I had to figure things out alone, trying to raise small kids and get to know a new place, find community, maybe even get some sleep if they were very lucky.

This is where Mrs. Taylor comes in. In practical terms, Mrs. Taylor is a neighbor who lived down the street. In the years of growing up, Mrs. Taylor is larger than life. She lights up a room when she enters it.

Mrs. Taylor knew how to make every single person feel loved. She still does. So when my sister and I were pulling each other's hair out, or my siblings were shouting at each other, my mom would pick up the phone and call Mrs. Taylor to ask if one of us could go over there for a little bit.

[ 1 : 1 3 ]     When you got there, Mrs. Taylor would say something like, Wow, I am so glad you're here. I was just hoping someone would come by and help me pick up these sticks in my yard.

Asking you to help her with yard work was the greatest honor she could give. Mrs. Taylor also did some things my parents couldn't do or just weren't into. My parents aren't much for gardening, but Mrs. Taylor loves to tell you about all the flowers.

She talked with me about God when my parents didn't always know how to do that. And that's okay that not everyone can do everything, but that's why we needed people like her. One thing I didn't understand about Mrs. Taylor as a child is that she was also making life a lot better for my parents.

Friends in a context where it was tough to go out and meet new people. We also had holidays with Mrs. Taylor because we didn't have any relatives close by. So she created a space where everyone felt seen.

Which leads us to today's Bible story. Message from Mark chapter 10. In this story, Jesus is traveling around and teaching different groups of people.

[ 2 : 1 9 ]     Mark chapter 10, verse 13. People were bringing little children to him in order that he might bless them. And the disciples spoke sternly to him. He was indignant and said to them, Let the little children come to me.

Do not stop them. For it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly, I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter.

Up in his arms, laid his hands on them and bless them. Sometimes we see images of today's passage where the children are drawn as silent, smiling angels.

The kind who always sit still in church, I'm sure. I think we have an image on the screen. If this were true, I don't imagine the disciples would have tried to shoo the kids away like they did.

I think the disciples are probably asking the families to leave because the kids are being kids. Hey, this guy's trying to preach and you all are running around. I'm going to touch the Son of God without using hand sanitizer.

[ 3 : 19 ] It's a whole thing. I don't think the disciples are mean. I think they're kind of in an overwhelming situation. And they're probably trying to create some structure and order. If you've ever spent time with children, this may feel very...

Still, Jesus channels his inner Mrs. Taylor. Let these little children come to me. Do not stop them. The kids who are fighting over their lunch, leaving crumbs everywhere, let them come to me.

The nine-year-old who keeps interrupting to ask questions... Most of you could stand to be more like these children. This isn't the only time we see Jesus interacting with kids.

In his second miracle, Jesus works through a little boy by using that boy's lunch to feed thousands of people. Jesus doesn't behave in public or fit nicely into our adult systems.

He invites kids to join him, creating a ministry that works through children, not in spite of them. For me, this feels in line with the other things I know about Jesus. Jesus' earthly ministry...

[ 4 : 20 ] With less power. People in poverty, people with disabilities and chronic illnesses, women. Jesus broadens our understanding of welcome. Not just who is welcome in the door, but who has a seat at the table.

And how we can create space that honors... ..needs. So I think it makes sense that Jesus would also care about making space for children. I have a tweet from Caitlin Schuss here.

It reads, Let me tell y'all why I'm so passionate about kids in church. Making churches safe and loving communities... Wiggly children is a direct confrontation to our obsession with power, status, productivity, efficiency, and control.

When our church is intentionally welcoming to children with all the energy they bring... ..help us to become a home to adults who may want to walk around or knit during service...

...they help us to become more accessible to some neurodivergent folks and folks with mental illness... ..they remind us that different forms of worship are okay. Right now...

[ 5 : 23 ] ...we're going to talk about some of the new year sermon series about some of the shifts we can make as a community. And today we're spending some time talking about how we can shift towards supporting people at all ages and stages of life, starting with kids.

I think kids are an important place to start because as Jesus... ..whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. Just like with the other verse, I sometimes see interpretations of this verse where people read it to mean...

...approach the Bible like a child. Always take it at face value. Always... ..just believe the Bible fully like a child would. I have a strong suspicion that folks who read it like that don't spend very much time around children.

A group of people who, in my experience, ask questions... ..and sometimes will interrupt a Bible story to look me in the eye and say, This is boring. Can we do something else?

And yet, Jesus tells us... ..whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like... ..will never enter it. As a quick note, the kingdom of God here is not about what happens when you die.

[ 6 : 35 ] It's about creating heaven on earth. We've talked about this in some previous sermons. So, Jesus is saying the way to build heaven on earth... ...is to approach that work like a child would.

Based on this passage, I have to believe that asking questions about God and about the Bible is holy. I also believe this partly because of Jesus' own life. We only have one story... We'll read it in a minute, but it's a story where a 12-year-old Jesus forgets to tell his parents he's not ready to go home yet...

...because he got distracted wandering into the temple in Jerusalem and asking a bunch of questions. Glossing very quickly... ...Jesus forgot to text his parents back for five days while they started walking home...

...essentially from D.C. to Richmond. ...and one of the things that surprises me about this passage is that we see the people in the temple engaging with Jesus. It's not a place where children should be seen and not heard.

It's a space where at least some people thought it was worth their time to have conversations about God with a kid... ...and even to learn from him. I wonder if the Jesus in his 30s looked back on this experience...

[ 7 : 48 ] ...doing kids away. Maybe he started to panic... ...seeing that kids were being pushed away from looking for answers... ...instead of towards a space where their questions should be welcome.

One of the things that I value most about the table is that I have... ...and figure out what I believe by having conversations with people here. And one of the best spaces I've gotten to do that is in TableKids...

...learning from the kids at our church. Folks on the TableKids team have heard me say that talking with kids about God... ...is the thing that got me interested in preaching.

When I started working with the kids, I felt a lot of pressure to make sure kids understood the right... ...answers and got the right things from their lessons. But as time has gone on, they have made it clear to me that there is often more than one...

...okay. The kids have helped me to ask better questions when I read the Bible... ...and to be okay with the questions we can't answer. They invite me to imagine stories more fully. What's happening in the space between these stories?

[ 8 : 49 ] Where are the children in this story? Have made it into the Bible? And what do I think was going on in the background? Pastor Tonetta preached a couple weeks ago about shifting towards enchantment...

...and meeting God without knowing all the answers. And working with the kids has certainly helped ground me in some of that. If you're not working with the kids this week... ...and we can pivot to drawing some pictures as a way of connecting with God.

Maybe the kids aren't engaged this week because there's a lot going on in their lives. And the most Jesus-like way for us to respond as leaders is to... ...telling and make space for what they're bringing to the church.

As a team, we don't always get it right. But we do try to hold on to the truth that kids are active participants in this community... ...and that we benefit from listening to them well. ...to me.

When I have always loved kids... ...but when I first started coming to the table, I told leadership I wasn't interested in table kids. At that time, I was 22. I had just moved to D.C.

[ 9 : 53 ] And I wanted to make some serious... I don't think I'm the only one. I think a lot of us get used to believing that we can either make friends with families... ...or with people who don't have kids, but not both.

I also know a number of people who like the table... specifically because it's a place where you can be a single adult... instead of having people push you to join their singles ministry...

...or bother you about when you're going to get married or have kids. I think that's a really valuable thing about this church... and I believe that multiple things can be true. Kids are a valuable part of our community as much as anyone else...

...and they deserve to be fully included. Another thing that is true is that a lot of people without kids... especially single people, feel undervalued in Christian spaces. The pandemic has been really hard on people living alone...

...to be a single person. And for folks who don't have kids and are looking for community... doing things like meeting up after church or happy hour... or holding community group in someone's studio apartment...

[ 10 : 55 ] ...at 8 p.m. on a weeknight... can create much-needed space for... another thing that is true is that parenting is really tough. The pandemic has also, of course, been quite hard on families...

...and just as it can be lonely to be a single person... it can also be quite lonely to parent. And for parents or caregivers who are looking for... bedtime on a weeknight or in a bar after work...

...or another space built for adults doesn't always work. As a friend said to me recently, sometimes it feels like there's not enough... social oxygen for all of these conversations.

But even though sometimes we... explicated with each other, I don't believe we have to. Based on both the life of Jesus and my own experiences... I think that people with and without kids have a lot to gain from each other...

...a lot to give each other. And I think we will be a stronger church... if we can... of our lives and ourselves... to support everyone wherever they land.

[ 11 : 55 ] I actually think one of the clearest examples... of intergenerational community in the Bible... is that story from Jesus' childhood. In Luke 2, starting... the child, Jesus, grew up and became strong.

He was filled with wisdom and God's favor was on him. Each year, his parents went to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. When he was 12 years old, they went to Jerusalem according to their custom.

They were returning home, but the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents didn't know it. Supposing that he was among their band of travelers... they journeyed on for a full day...

...while looking for him among their family and friends. When they didn't find Jesus... to look for him. After three days, they found him in the temple. He was sitting among the teachers...

...listening to them and putting questions to them. Everyone who heard him was amazed by his understanding and his answers. That's Luke 2, verses 40 through 47. This passage isn't usually read as being about community...

[ 12 : 55 ] ...but I think it tells us a lot about the kind of community Jesus had growing up. His family walked a whole day without realizing that he wasn't with them. I want to name it. That feels shocking.

...of home alone? I'm not sure. But what this tells me is that Jesus did not grow up in a community... that put the nuclear family above everything else. Jesus grew up in a community that believed...

...where your parents trusted that your neighbors and friends... and you would be okay. Mary and Joseph were probably facing some of the same struggles...

...as modern day parents in trying to juggle their jobs... ...and take care of their kids and put food on the table... ...but they weren't doing it alone. ... A community that is looking out for one another...

...that fully supports people of all ages and stages... ...especially right now when so many of us are feeling burnt out... ...how can we possibly find the energy to meet other people's needs...

[ 13 : 54 ] ...when our own often aren't... ...I think we have to rely on community. I say community and not just friendship intentionally... ...as important as friendship is. This is something I have learned from listening to community activist Mia Birdsong.

She talks a lot about how important it is to have a village... ...but if you're not a friend or partner responsible... ...for supporting someone else in a hard time... ...it becomes a lot to carry. Maybe some folks here have had that experience...

...but if you are part of a circle of people... ...who are supporting someone together... ...you can find ways to give each other margin... ...and make each other's lives easier. This is a space where marginalized groups of people...

...queer folks, black folks, disabled folks... ...have been paving a way because the closed binary structures... ...for family that we've been given in modern America... ...have never worked for everyone.

...of these groups of people have created systems... ...of relying on each other through networks of neighbors... ...and aunties and chosen family. So I am trying to follow their lead...

[ 14 : 54 ] ...in suggesting ways that we can build community... ...and rely on one another. When I do support for my friends... ...I get a little nervous. I don't know all of my friends of friends very well.

So if one of my close friends were to have an emergency tomorrow... ...I'm not always sure who I'd turn to... ...to create that circle of people... ...who can meet their needs together. But I actually think this is...

...to have a church. If someone in my small group is grieving... ...the people in my small group can come together... ...to check in on them... ...and pray for them and support them.

If someone on the Table Kids team goes to the hospital... ...my team should be able to lean on our... ...to make sure they have the support they need. This should be something the church is great at.

In just about every book in the New Testament... ...we see the biblical writers asking the early church... ...to bear one another's burdens... ...be patient with each other... ...pray for each other... ...teaching us to love one another...

[ 15 : 51 ] ...and care for each other... ...is central to Jesus' work on earth... ...and we can do that by using our strengths... ...and our gifts to support one another in community. This is the church at its best.

When I think about supporting families better... ...I think a lot about a comment Richard Kelly... ...used to make all the time... ...which is that he wanted everybody at the table... ...to live in the same apartment or condo building...

...so that we could all live in physical community together. How nice it would be... ...if a parent was going to the grocery store... ...and they could just drop their kids off with us...

...my partner and I down the hall... ...and then they could have an easier shopping trip... ...and the kids could be supported by family around them... ...or community around them. It feels like a perfect way... ...that families could support each other in community...

...and unfortunately it feels a little unrealistic... ...even though Richard does continue to send us... ...listings in his building. My partner and I live in a building that is...

[ 16 : 52 ] ...there are about 100 units in my building... ...and I think there's one child. A lot of the families in our church... ...live in other parts of town... ...that are more built for families... ...so I do want to name that the geography of our city...

...can make it tough to create that kind of easy... ...casual... ...but there are ways... ...that those of us without kids... ...can use the gifts of our lives and ourselves... ...to support families around us.

When my partner and I are meeting up with a family... ...we make it a rule to go somewhere convenient to them... ...because we know it is much easier to get us... ...than it is to rally young kids... ...so we try to use that to our advantage.

I know that hosting can be expensive... ...and can feel like a lot of pressure... ...so I want to go back to the example of Mrs. Taylor... ...and remind us that... ...community doesn't have to mean... ...having a nice dinner together. You can be doing chores together...

...picking up sticks in the yard... ...cooking dinner together... ...organizing the bookshelf. I know that I've been talking a lot about kids so far... ...but the other part of supporting families...

[ 17 : 53 ] ...and especially parents is that... ...occasionally want to have conversations with other adults... ...so if you are not a huge kid person... ...I think it's still probably valuable...

...to be a consistent friend... ...to the parents and caretakers around you. I also want to put in a good quick word... ...all great. Literally all of them. The last few years we've been doing...

...it's been tough. We've been doing virtual table kids... ...and now we have table kids... ...right before bedtime on a Sunday night... ...and still the parents of this church... ...truly are so kind...

...so as a personal endorsement... ...being in community with the families here... ...has absolutely improved my life... ...and I recommend it. With that said... ...I want to give us all a quick moment...

...to talk with each other... ...about how we as a church... ...can support families better. ...how can you show up... ...for the families in your community... ...whether or not they go to the table. I would encourage us to think...

[ 18 : 51 ] ...not just in terms of times... ...when you can say... ...let me know if you need anything... ...but specific ways... ...that you can show up... ...for the families in your community. How can we... ...it's more accessible to families...

...what are specific ways... ...we can reach out and offer support... ...and then if you are a parent... ...are there ways that you... ...can ask for support... ...from the people in your life... ...without kids... ...and how might you ask for that help...

...so you can take just... ...yourselves. As we talk now... ...about how we can support... ...single people... ...being very clearly... ...that single people...

...are whole people. I know that we all know that... ...at some level... ...but I want to say it... ...a couple times... ...because it's not always... ...the message society tells us... ...and it's definitely not... ...the message that churches... ...usually tell us.

So once again... ...by God... ...as whole people. Single people bring... ...individual gifts... ...to our community... ...and often have insights... ...and perspectives...

[ 19 : 46 ] ...that are unique... ...to singlehood. We see this in the lives... ...of many of the earliest Christians... ...including of course Jesus... ...are... ...those perspectives. Also...

...we live in a world... ...that prioritizes marriage... ...both socially and legally... ...and there are some roles... ...that our society... ...tends to assume... ...a spouse will fill... ...which can make things harder... ...for single people. The community activist...

...of a friend of hers... ...who has diabetes... ...managing diabetes... ...by herself usually goes fine... ...except when it doesn't... ...so Mia and her friend... ...had some conversations...

...about how to check in... ...and make sure her friend... ...is okay. Mia knows where... ...the friend's house... ...she knows the contact... ...information for her friend's doctors...

...and the friend texts... ...a group chat... ...if she ever feels like... ...her blood sugar is getting too low... ...to ask them to check in on her... ...and make sure she's okay. I am not here... ...to recommend...

[ 20 : 40 ] ...that you... ...have medical information. What I am here to do... ...is to suggest... ...that if you already... ...are at that level of friendship... ...with someone who you know...

...has a chronic condition... ...to think about asking... ...the questions... ...would it be helpful... ...to have somebody else... ...is there any information... ...I should know... ...in case of an emergency...

...are there specific times... ...when I should check in on you... ...there are a lot of other roles... ...that we often assume... ...a spouse or partner will play... ...so as we shift towards... ...supporting everyone... ...in our community...

...being the ways... ...single folks are excluded... ...from some of our systems... ...of support. I mentioned that... ...my partner Josh... ...and I tend to go to... ...other people's houses... ...if they have kids... ...that said...

...a single friend pointed out to me... ...that sometimes it's nice to host... ...it doesn't have... ...but we can check in... ...with ourselves... ...about whether or not... ...we are assuming... ...single friends will always be... ...the ones to be flexible...

[ 21 : 36 ] ...also it's such a treat... ...to see the way... ...that people host us... ...in their space... ...and how people make us... ...feel welcome... ...by that same token... ...we can check in... ...about the ways we... ...wetting...

...and baby showers... ...or finding ways... ...to celebrate people... ...without partners... ...and kids as well... ...I mentioned that... ...Mrs. Taylor spent... ...a lot of holidays... ...with my family growing up... ...that shared celebration... ...and the way she was...

...integrated into our big... ...big moments... ...growing up... ...so again... ...I want to give us... ...a moment to talk... ...about how we... ...as a church... ...single folks better...

...how can we create... ...structures that recognize... ...and celebrate... ...single people... ...in our community... ...what might we notice... ...about the ways... ...we are unintentionally... ...in parenthood... ...and single folks...

...what are some ways... ...that you can be... ...intentional about... ...sharing your needs... ...and asking for help... ...so again... ...just a couple minutes... ...as we wrap up today... ...I want to go back... ...to something that...

[ 22 : 31 ] ...Pastors Toneta and Anthony... ...have been mentioning... ...throughout this series... ...all of this is hard... ...and it's kind of messy... ...learning to ask for help... ...and... ...specific help... ...our muscles...

...that take some time... ...to build... ...and sometimes we'll get it wrong... ...and then we'll get to... ...practice apologizing... ...and learning from our mistakes... ...and listening better... ...which is all... ...very messy... ...I certainly have some work...

...to do... ...as much as I would... ...interconnected community... ...most of our leaders... ...right now are pretty new... ...and we're not there yet... ...for me... ...creating community... ...that fully includes families...

...also means questioning... ...some of the adult things... ...that I don't always think about... ...hosting game nights... ...with lots of small... ...meeting up for coffee... ...at crowded coffee shops... ...with very high tables...

...enjoying special prayer services... ...that are built... ...for silent reflection... ...creating space... ...for families... ...and single people... ...and kids... ...and part of people... ...take some time...

[ 23 : 26 ] ...to figure out... ...and... ...and... ...I believe fully... ...that the purpose... ...of the church... ...is to create... ...the kingdom of God... ...here... ...and that means...

...listening to one another... ...and bearing one another's burdens... ...and living in connection... ...to each other... ...to make all... ...it means putting in the work... ...now to figure out... ...how we can support...

...single people... ...and partnered people... ...and caregivers... ...and of course... ...kids... ...inviting everyone... ...to engage... ...and lifts their burdens... ...and lifts their burdens... ...