

**Part 1: Light and Love**

Wow—what an amazing week of Vacation Bible School we've had and what an amazing day we are having! Kids, there have been some 260 of you here this week, along with 156 volunteers and our wonderful staff—all simply joyful children, helpers, teachers and leaders. It's been fantastic! The theme all week has been on Jesus, the light of the world who brings light into our lives in good times and in dark times. Jesus loves kids. He said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs" (Luke 18:16). Jesus loves children and we love children, too. You bring joy into the church.

Six-year-old Angie and her four-year-old brother Joel were sitting together in church. Joel was giggling, singing and talking out loud. Finally, his big sister had had enough. "You're not supposed to talk out loud in church." "Why? Who's going to stop me?" Joel asked. Angie pointed to the back of the church and said, "See those two men standing by the door? They're hushers." Pastor Dave Charlton reported, "After a worship service, mother with a fidgety seven-year-old boy told me how she finally got her son to sit still and be quiet. About halfway through the sermon, she leaned over and whispered, 'If you don't be quiet, Pastor Charlton is going to lose his place and will have to start his sermon over again!' It worked." And one particular four-year-old girl prayed, "And forgive us our trash baskets as we forgive those who put trash in our baskets." A little boy was overheard praying: "Lord, if you don't make me a better boy, don't worry about it. I'm having a real good time like I am." And on we could go! We love kids and we love them here in church.

Our Session has been working very hard to see that here at VPC we encourage people at every age and in every stage of life. What in the past was simply called Christian Education, at least for the children's aspect of our work, we are now calling Next Gen Ministry. Next Gen ministry is all about the church family working together to raise the next generation in the Christian faith. Kara Powell with the Sticky Faith movement says that up to half of the kids who graduate from great youth groups ultimately drift from God and the church. Their research shows that the typical church programs segregate kids from adults. So its no wonder that if parents go to church while the kids only go to Sunday School that by the time they graduate from high school they will not have a homing beacon for church and worship when they leave the home. This is why we work to include children in the first third of our worship services every week. Frankly, once a child reaches the second grade, he or she can sit through the entire worship service if their parents will parent them to do so.

The sticky faith people also talk about two kinds of parents—dry cleaner parents and partner parents. Dry cleaner parents treat the church like the dry cleaners—drop kids off and expect to pick them up all clean and Christianized. Which may suggest the parents’ faith isn’t particularly robustly deep, yet at least they show some concern for their kids spiritual growth.

On the other hand, partner parents know that the most significant way to help children grow in the faith dimension of their lives is first of all to make their faith an active part of their home life. Second, it is to partner with the people of all ages in the church in growing the spiritual lives of their children.<sup>1</sup> It is true that years ago, coming to church and Sunday School was incredibly consistent. They used to hand out attendance pins to kids with perfect attendance and a lot of kids got those pins. Not so much today; with so much travel and other activities, kids need their parents more than ever to teach them their faith, to teach them about Jesus and to partner with the church in doing so if they truly want their children centered on Jesus Christ.

One of the things I love about VPC is our range of ages. Some of us have just entered our world and others of us have been here a very long time. It is our joy to encourage people at every stage of life. The fact that I am standing in a sanctuary that has been made to look like the inside of a great cave for VBS tells you that we do want to encourage our children. What we know is the future faith of our children relies on their intergenerational relationships—relationships with people of all ages. Ann Marie and I visited a dear friend last weekend in Virginia Beach who turned 90-years-old yesterday. She has inspired our faith in ways I cannot begin to tell you. No matter what your age may be, you may encourage the faith of our children and they will encourage yours.

## **Part 2: Light and Life**

Our theme all week has been Jesus the light of the world. He is our light no matter how dark our darkness may seem to be. A while ago, I went to Dulles airport to fly to Anchorage, Alaska for a family gathering. I checked my bag and was walking to security when I realized looking through my right eye the airport was bright and light the way it always is. However, when I looked through my left eye, the airport was dark and it looked like the people walking around me had no arms! It called to mind the time Jesus healed a blind man. When Jesus asked the blind man how his sight was, he replied, “I can see people but they look like trees walking” (Mark 8:24). I thought, “They really do look like trees walking!”

So I stepped aside from the flow of people and just sat down to think about it. I decided to “un” check-in, retrieved my suitcase and went to the eye doctor, who said it was an inflammation that was very treatable but it could have been very serious if I had not sought help

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y0CQCakBPew>

right away. The blind man who was talking to Jesus knew he needed help. Jesus touched his eyes and his sight was restored, and he could see everything clearly. Jesus always is all about bringing light into our darkness.

And there are all kinds of darkness in our lives. There is the darkness in our country that we have seen in Charleston, Orlando, Dallas, many places and now in Nice, France. We know the darkness of our own lives when we speak and act in ways that are hurtful, and that destroy the joy of other people. It is dark when it feels like you are in a cave and you are uncertain about what to do or where to turn or feel afraid. We know when Jesus saw crowds of people, he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless. To be helpless is to be thrown down, knocked down by something and life feels dark. To be harassed means to be worn down, to be exhausted, and hassled. It is dark when the sheer busyness and fatigue of life cuts you off from the joy of knowing Jesus.

A gentleman was shopping at a major mall like Tyson's Corner and happened to notice a woman with a fussy little daughter saying, "There, there Jenny. Only two more stores and we can go home." As it turned out the man came across the same mother and fussy child in another store where the daughter wanted candy and the Mom was saying, "Not now dear. Jenny just hold on. Only one more store to go." So it was in a third store the man sees the mother and whining child. "Jenny it's going to be alright. This is our last store and you can go home and take a nap." When the gentleman was in the parking lot heading for his car he saw the mother putting her daughter in their car. He walked over to them. "I don't mean to intrude, Ma'am but I must say the way you have handled your daughter Jenny in her fussiness is marvelous." The mother replied, "You don't understand, sir. My daughter's name is Marissa. I'm Jenny!" A lot of us are like Jenny. So much going on, too much going on and life is as much about coping as anything else! Things may feel dark.

So when you encounter darkness, what do you do to re-center yourself around Jesus, the Lord of light who will guide you? As Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). And there is the wonderful word we often read at Christmas: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined" (Isaiah 9:2). Our kids learned some great things this week about Jesus as our light—that Jesus gives us hope, that Jesus gives us courage, that Jesus gives us direction, that Jesus gives us love and that Jesus gives us his power.

I love that Jesus is always here, always near, always with you. My son called to say that he and his kids were out at a nearby park having a very successful Pokemon Go hunt. Pokemon Go is all the rage. I just happen to know there was a Pokemon in my office this week, that there was one on the sofa in our family room and one right here next to where I am standing now! The tagline for Pokemon Go is "Gotta catch'em all!" Which has people walking into every room,

bumping into trees and into each other! “Jesus Go” isn’t the same as Pokemon GO! The joy of knowing Jesus Christ is we don’t have to go catch him! Jesus is always here, always near, giving us hope, courage, direction, love and power. Sometimes our kids get the wonder of this truth before it sinks into grown-up minds.

Fred Craddock tells of a girl about seven-years-old who came to his church. He said, “She came to church regularly for Sunday school, and sometimes her parents let her stay for the worship service, too, but her parents didn’t come. [They were the dry cleaner parents I mentioned a while ago, just drop off their child and get her back clean.] Her parents were moving up in the business world and saw no need to go to church. But the whole town knew of the parties they gave on Saturday nights as a part of their moving up thing. Drinking. Vulgarities. Everybody knew. But there was their beautiful girl every Sunday going to church.

“One Sunday morning,” Fred said, “I looked out, and the little girl was there with some people and I thought they were her friends until I realized it was her Mom and Dad. After the sermon, at the close of the service, came an invitation to follow Jesus, and Mr. and Mrs. Mom and Dad came to the front. They confessed faith in Jesus Christ and said they wanted to follow Jesus. Afterward I asked, “What prompted this?” They said, “Well, do you know about our parties?” And I said, “Yeah, I have heard about your parties.”

“They said, ‘Well, we had one last night again, and it got a little loud, it got a little rough, and there was too much going on. The noise woke our daughter and she came downstairs to about the third step. She saw that we were eating and drinking, and she said, ‘Oh, can I say the blessing? God is great; God is good, let us thank him for our food. Good-night, everybody.’ She went back upstairs. Immediately people began to say, “Oh my, it’s time to go,’ ‘We’ve stayed way too long.’ Within two minutes the room was empty.’

“Mr. and Mrs. Mom and Dad began cleaning up, picking up crumpled napkins and wasted and spilled peanuts and half sandwiches, and taking empty glasses on trays to the kitchen. And each with two trays, he and she met on either side of the sink, they looked at each other, and he expressed what both were thinking: “Where do we think we’re going?” The moment of truth.<sup>2</sup> So they turned from one kind of home to another, from a home of darkness, far from God and far from substance to the light our Lord had prepared for them. Our Lord saw them and embraced them when they turned to him.

If you would like in your every darkness, decide to follow Jesus! Just tell him that is what you want to do. As Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).

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<sup>2</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories*(Chalice Press: St. Louis 2001), p23-24