

## **THE SPIRIT OF OUR CHILDREN**

*Shared in Worship at Highland Baptist Church on June 8, 2025 by Rev. Renee Purtlebaugh*

Last Sunday morning while most of the adults and youth were downstairs in the Fellowship Hall gathered for our second congregational conversation about where are we going as a church and what are we going to focus on, our children were upstairs on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor having their own conversation.

But in order to talk about that – where are we going? what do you love about our church? where should we focus in our future? – I thought we should probably start at the beginning which was to answer a really important question. What is a church?

So, we gathered around some tables, and each of our children had a blank sheet of paper and access to coloring supplies. And I asked them to close their eyes and imagine their answer to this question – What is a church? – whatever pops into your mind first.

And so they drew. And their drawings are on the board right outside these doors in the Commons, and I hope you'll take a look before you go home today.

Some of them drew chairs. Some of them drew pews. Some of them drew people. Some of them drew buildings.

Then we gathered on the carpet, with all of their drawings. And I asked them to share their drawings with one another and maybe some words to go with that. What is a church? And here's what some of our children said.

It's a place where we can learn to love God.

It's a community.

It's a place where it doesn't matter if you have black skin or white skin. Everybody can be here. (A place for everyone with our differences and with our similarities.)

A place to learn the stories of Jesus.

It's people.

It's a building.

It's the cross.

It's people who believe in God.

So, after we talked about what is a church, I had gathered images from all over the church. People who had created something that represented their perspective on church. So I took this painting off the wall in the office – a watercolor by John Sanders – of the Highland building in the snow with the crosses on the lawn at Advent and the Christmas wreaths on the door. I took another painting out of the lobby – you may have seen it - from the perspective of the pulpit looking out into the sanctuary with people around. And then I called up John Pacyga, and I asked him, “Do you still have those 3-D printed churches that you made of Highland years ago when 3-D printing was brand new?” And he had one.

And then, we gathered all this in the circle and then I asked the kids. And we put our hands like this. Do you remember? *Here is the church. Here is the steeple. Open up the doors. And see all the people.*

Because we needed to connect the threads, the cloud of witness, the people who have loved this place through time and have made it possible to be here. But we also needed to move it into the present, the people who are still among us, YOU.

Then, I asked our children, if you had to complete the sentence, say a friend asks you, tell me about your church. What should I know about it? And they filled in the blank, "My church is \_\_\_\_\_."

Noah said, "My church is beautiful."

Fin said, "My church is amazing."

Wally said, "My church is rejoicing."

Eliza said, "My church is unique."

A.T. said, "My church is a place for everyone."

Walt said, "My church is a community."

Some children who were visiting with us said, "This church is wonderful." And, "This church is safe."

And another child said, "This is the only Highland in the world."

And then I asked our kids, you know when you talk about the future you know things are going to change a little bit right. Things don't say the same; that's not how it works. And so, if there are things that change, what are the things you hope don't change. Don't change these.

They said, "The playground." My daughter said, "the offices" because she hangs out there a lot. The goldfish snacks and the meals that we eat together. Happiness. The people. The sanctuary. Our friends and our time together. And we wouldn't want to change the roles that we have, the jobs that we do, those are important. And someone said, a public way to learn about Jesus.

Then one of the things we did next was, I don't know if you'll remember, but Chris shared with us on his first Sunday preaching and maybe in an article in the newsletter, his definition that he had come up with for church over the years, and it was, "a group of people following God the best they can, together." Do you remember this?

So, we took all of these descriptions of church, and we put it up against that definition and we kind of said, "Do they match? Is Chris right? Were we right?"

And of course, a group of people, we definitely had that.

Following God, we got that.

The best they can, we've got that.

Together, we have that too.

Another question I asked our children that day was, "Do you feel like grown-ups listen to you?" And they said, "No."

So, I shared with them that one of my jobs as your [their] pastor is to make sure that your voice is heard and amplified, so that others can know the spirit of God is moving within you.

And so I hope today as you hear their [the children's] words and as you see their art, that you will let the spirit move through you and hear our children. Thanks be to God for every single one of them. Amen.