

The most embarrassing Sunday ever

By [Martha-Lynn Corner](#)

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Our family was "that family" in church.

I'm sure most of us are familiar with what I mean by "that family." It could be the one that always comes in late, or the one with kids making weird clicking noises during times of silence, or kids who decide the aisle is ripe for a repeat performance of Usain Bolt's gold-medal effort in the 200m.

Honestly, most of that stuff is pretty mild. It's expected, even craved by certain older members of the congregation, who will take a little chaos if it means the church is full of the youngest members who will continue to be there long after they themselves are not.

Then there's us. My family, a couple of Sundays ago. My family, who sees your mini-tantrum or light disruption during the peace and raises it a cage match. In the mud. With electric eels.

Our church was holding its semi-annual "Mass on the Grass." It's the lowest of low church, with chairs and blankets set up outside, and folksy guitar music, and the enormous wooden chalice that nobody really likes all that much but which is too casual to use on the high altar and also too costly to "lose" in the sacristy somewhere. These services are some of my absolute favorites all year—it just makes sense to praise the God I so often experience in nature by setting up shop outside. So we move some of the inside out, and experience a different sort of openness to the Spirit. It's very freeing; in fact, as the congregation gathered together, some kids ran through the set-up once or twice, experimenting with where the boundaries might lie. At that point my kids were actually sitting upright in their chairs, and I sat back and exhaled, looking forward to a quiet hour of doing something really important without being in charge of every aspect of it myself. (Which is what the rest of the week so often feels like.)

Little did I know.

It all started with the acorns. Silas, who had snuck some miniature pirate figurines into the bag of books he typically uses to sit (mostly) still during church, decided the acorns on the ground all around us would make really great ammunition for plastic pirate warfare. Eva, noticing Silas crawling around and beginning to gather a stockpile, gave me a sidelong glance and slid out of her own seat. A single raised eyebrow over at her brother threw down the silent gauntlet: "You didn't say anything to him about this, sooo ..." She was right, of course. The guitars began their peaceful strumming. I judged fun with acorns to be pretty benign, overall, and ignored it.

The music switched to a pretty, rousing number, and I'll admit to being swept up enough in it that I ignored the children to sing a few bars. At that point Jason had successfully negotiated Silas back into his chair, though his hands were full of dirt and twigs. Eva was still in the dirt, though more or less in her own chair space. I kept singing.

I was ripped back into reality about five seconds later when I felt Silas kick me, hard, in the back of the knee. Confused, I turned half-way only to see him beginning to simultaneously climb up the back of my chair and his, much like Spiderman on a vertical surface. Since Jason was already deep into the pseudo-cheerful stern whisper—you know, where your face looks pleasant for the benefit of everyone watching but you're saying stuff like "If you don't SIT YOUR BUTT DOWN SO HELP ME"—I turned to glance at Eva. Eva, who was silently crawling away through the dirt, all but looking up church ladies' skirts in pursuit of yet more acorns. I swooped in.

Eva began to loudly and shrilly attempt to explain that she'd lost her FAVORITE ACORN, MOMMY—HONESTLY MOMMY JUST LISTEN TO ME, YOU NEVER LISTEN—at about the same moment the music stopped and we downshifted into the quiet, opening prayer portion of the service. Meanwhile, Silas began to emit a kind of curdling yodel-shriek, going limp as Jason attempted to lift him off the back of the chairs and remove him from our row entirely to go and have "a talk."

It wasn't working. Next to me, Eva began to sob. I watched, defeated, as Jason gave up and began physically dragging Silas out of our row. "All are welcome, all are welcome," the hymn insisted weakly.

As if on cue, the music changed. It might have been my imagination, but this hymn seemed extra loud and fervent, as if the lovely trio of musicians up front sensed the need for a new center of attention. I pretended this one was a favorite, cradling an

irritated and snarling Eva under my arm and singing as if nothing even remotely embarrassing had just happened. As if my cheeks weren't flaming red, my eyes full of humiliated tears, my shoulders so tight up around my earlobes that my back was still sore hours later.

And it worked, sort of. Something about pretending to feel grace let a little bit of grace in, drop by drop. When Jason brought Silas back to our chairs (scowling but mollified and unhurt by his removal), I pulled him into my lap. He snuggled in and I rocked him slightly, ostensibly restoring his equilibrium but really just working on my own.

It took another 20 minutes before I felt my blood pressure drop back down to medically acceptable levels. I quietly scanned to see who was sitting in front of us (and therefore oblivious to our shenanigans) vs. who was been sitting behind, no doubt dialing CPS to haul away the incompetent parents in row five. As luck would have it, however, I'd signed up to be a chalice bearer, and soon found myself wielding the over-large wooden tankard, struggling to keep folks from tipping face-forward into a vat of consecrated tawny port. And then my family stepped forward, and Silas reached his hands out for the bread, and I gasped as I remembered that we'd talked about him taking communion for the first time this morning. He nibbled gingerly on his portion, bypassing my chalice like we'd discussed, since our practice session at home with a hotdog bun and a few drops of Shiraz had left him gagging in disgust.

And suddenly, the nonsense from earlier didn't matter so much anymore. My children might never be perfect Precious Moments figurines during church, but they are as much a part of the body of Christ as anyone who has ever stepped up to receive the bread and the wine. I finished out the service with a pile of acorns in my hand and a plastic pirate sticking uncomfortably into my backside, and a lot less anxiety.

Until I remembered that Sunday School was starting the following week. Seriously—God help their teachers.

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