



Back to School? Ugh.

First day of school? Get ready for some real education.

It was the first day of school ever for our son John. Starting kindergarten. At a time when there was no kindergarten in local schools here.

But there was a kindergarten in Collinsville Baptist Church. It was led by Dee Summerlin and Gail McReynolds. Met downstairs in that corner room. And John was about to be a student.

We had lived in Collinsville for a while. John had made friends at Sunday School and other activities. Played with our neighbors – Josh, Paige, another Josh, Keith, that Susan Weaver girl. But he did not know most of those that went to the kindergarten.

I was elected to bring John to his first day of school. We walked into the church together holding hands. He seemed a little unsure about this school thing. I told him that I would pick him up in time for lunch with his mom and brother.

As we went around the corner in the hall, I slowed down. There was a traffic jam in front of me. Several moms (don't think there were any other dads) were

standing in the hall holding their child as mom and child cried. Lots of crying. No signs of other parents leaving.

I made a quick decision. I thought that it would be a terrible mistake for me to pick him up and stand in the hall with him to join the criers. I got down on one knee and hugged him. Told him I loved him and would see him soon. He was crying. Tears running down his face. Red hair and redder eyes. I hugged him again. Stood up and cleared a path. And I handed John's hand to one of the teachers. She led him into the room as I made my way through the crying mob and walked back up the hall.

You may think that I was mean and unfeeling. Not so. I felt that John had to learn quickly to be okay without Gloria or I always standing by him or holding him. I think you would agree that is part of what happens at school. I am not saying that group of five or six moms were wrong to continue to hold their kids and both cry with them. I am saying that sooner or later they, too, had to turn loose of their children.

My situation was different from theirs. As I got back to the corner of the hall I turned left and went upstairs. Where the pastor's office was back then. I knew that I could not let John realize that I would and could rescue him at any time. And I had to make that clear on the first day. The other parents would eventually leave (some of them stayed all that day holding a crying child). For me leaving him was the loving thing to do.

I went into my office and heaved a big sigh. Feeling pretty sure I had done right. And wondering why I didn't feel better about it. Parenting.

I did not count on what came next. I could hear John crying. He was not aware that I was there and just up the stairs. I could hear Gail comforting him and moving him over to some activity. He was not loudly sobbing. But he was crying loud enough for me to hear him. John never knew I was there in the building. That I could have been downstairs to help in seconds. He just felt deserted. And I felt torn.

My decision as a parent was being called into question. By me. My baby is crying. What would it hurt for me to go get him and bring him up to my office for

a while? He could sit on the floor and play with the toys I kept for him there. I wavered. Almost got up. He let out a louder sob. And I did not get up.

I sat and pretended that I was getting work done on my next sermon. I wasn't. I wanted so badly to go pick him up. Nope, not going to do it. Might be best for me to go down there. But not for him. And a tear rolled down my face. John cried more than me that day. But not by a lot. This being a parent is hard.

It took a long time for John to settle down. And then we had round two. Dee had arranged for the kindergarten kids to go down to the school to get their pictures made. It was student picture day at Collinsville School. As they filed out to the cars, I heard a small cry of uncertainty. And then they were gone. I worked a little.

45 minutes later they came back in. I was pretty sure that I heard a little sob from him. It was an awful lot for a very small boy to go through in one day. New places. New people. Lots of unknown people. No sign anywhere of a mom or dad. He was entitled to some tears.

The clock ticked slowly. I think the day ended at noon. I went down and met him in the hall. His eyes were still red. But he seemed to have survived. I took his hand and we walked to the car. Away from other eyes, I gave him a big hug. And pretended that everything was fine. Made sure to tell him to tell his mother about what a good day he had. And he did. Gloria hugged him. Sat him down to lunch. And he and Mark were soon playing happily.

The next day there were no tears at the kindergarten door. For John or for me.

Raising children is wonderful. And it can be really hard. Often described as like teaching them to ride a bike. Training wheels. Holding the bike as they learn. But the day always comes when you have to turn loose of the bike. Even if they fall. Sometimes skinned knees are necessary for growth. The tough thing for parents is knowing when to turn loose. The tougher thing is living with the decision. Parenting is a time of constantly questioning yourself.

But I did not change how I did first days at school for any of his brothers. Love 'em. Take 'em to the door. And leave. Even if dad is hurting.

I think about that first day for John. How hard it was for me to stay upstairs in my office as I heard him crying downstairs. Believing I had to let him cry to grow up. But crying myself at his tears. And now realizing that I am the one who learned more that day. A real education for me.

I think that is a little of what is going on right now. We are sick of this virus. We want it gone. We beg God to take it away. But He is waiting. Letting us have this time to grow. Watching to see if we are learning to trust Him in times of trouble.

But also hurting with us. Crying as we cry. Loving us enough to let us grow into the women and men He made us to be. Knowing a day is soon coming when there will be no more tears forever.

Let us so live our lives that they honor our Heavenly Father. Even in the middle of a plague.

*Just so you know – I did ask John if I could share the story of his first day of school. And if I could use that picture. He graciously said yes. Below is another picture of John. No red eyes this time. And it worked out well for him with that Weaver girl. Thank you John and Susan for living lives that so honor God.*

*John also told me that he has no bad memories of that first day. Turns out I really was the student that day. John said it was harder for him a year later when he and Mark started Collinsville School on the same day – Mark in the very first ever kindergarten class at the school (Patricia Edwards was his teacher) and John beginning first grade. John said that he thought that he and Mark would be in the same room and was saving a seat for Mark. He was crushed to learn they would not be together in school.*





