

HELP FROM GODLY PLAY TRAINERS

HELP WITH MANAGING TIME

A STORY LIKE YOURS

I was a door person in a classroom of children who did not know me well. The storyteller, who had known this group of children for a long time, had just presented the story of Jesus and the Twelve. Toward the end of the wondering, she asked, "I wonder which of the people in this story has a story like yours?" I expected children to talk about Jesus, perhaps, or about Peter.

But a girl in the circle replied, "Judas. My story is like Judas' because sometimes I betray my friends by telling their secrets." She thought a minute and added, "I need to work on trying not to do that."

Other children in the circle were quiet and beginning to squirm a bit, but the storyteller's only response was in a calm and neutral tone of voice: "Hmm." After a period of silence, she moved on to other questions, but I could see that an important transformation had happened in the circle of children that day. Trust was built because one girl had the courage to share a part of her story and the teacher helped make it safe to share by her non-judgmental response.

—Kathleen Capcara

WONDERING: OUR FIRST RESPONSE TO THE LESSON

by Kathleen Capcara

As a storyteller, one of the parts of leading Godly Play I like best is the first response from the circle of children after they hear the lesson. It's the part we call "wondering."

"I wonder." What a remarkable approach to what we have known for years as "Christian education." The phrase "I wonder" is so deeply at the core of Godly Play that it appears as a shadow in the right-hand margins of every page of these books. Wondering as a response to God's presence in the Bible stories and in our lives implies many things. The word "wonder" has so many layers of meaning that Webster's dictionary lists several separate definitions, and all of them apply to what we do in Godly Play.

The first definition of wonder, “the quality of exciting, amazed admiration,” expresses our most immediate and natural response to Bible stories and religious traditions. As Godly Play storytellers, we use beautiful materials to present a lesson to the children. When the lesson is over, we sit back and look at the physical representation of the story present in the center of our circle. Words elude us as we sit marveling at God’s work as it is revealed in the lesson—and now among us. All we can say at first is “wow!” But one of the goals of Godly Play is to help us learn religious language so we can use it together to find meaning in our experiences. Wondering is a way to move beyond the “wow” and into the second meaning of wonder: “to be curious or in doubt about.”

Curiosity and doubt are not the first words most of us associate with the concept of education, not even religious education. For many years religious education has been about indoctrination and enculturation—passing on information about the teachings and traditions of our religious institution. As Christian educators, we have been trained to make sure the students have a firm grasp of the information we are handing over to them. The curiosity and doubt expressed by the phrase “I wonder” may not seem to have much to contribute to such serious business.

“I wonder what part of this story you like best?” the storyteller asks the children after the Godly Play lesson is presented. As I train Sunday school teachers who are working with children using the Godly Play method, the wondering after the lesson is one of the parts of Godly Play that makes them feel uneasy. “We often don’t get much response from the children,” they tell me. “How do we know they are getting it?” In fact, Godly Play teachers ask that first question in precisely those words to demonstrate to the children that we are not fishing for an answer here. We use the phrase “I wonder” to show the children we are curious about how they are thinking about the lesson and to remind them it is safe to share those thoughts with us. The use of “I wonder” makes the question an indirect one, which is our first clue to the children that our aim is not to put them on the spot. The second clue is in our words, “I wonder what *you* like best.” Each individual listener will have a unique answer to that question because the question is about them and their specific response.

But why ask such a seemingly superficial question when we have so much important information about God and scripture and our religious traditions to teach the children? We ask wondering questions because keeping the questions open is the best way to invite people into a lifelong engagement with God and scripture and religious traditions.

When we ask a pointed question, like “What does the mustard seed represent in this story?” it most often has the effect of shutting the children down. They are not sure what the teacher is looking for. They become afraid of giving the “wrong answer” and appearing foolish. They feel frustrated because they have a sense that the teacher is fishing for something specific, and they are not sure what it is. They want to please

the teacher by giving “the right answer,” but they instinctively know that a lot of what religion is about is mystery. Children in this situation feel a double bind.

The whole point of Godly Play, of listening to the lessons and using them to find meaning in our experience, is to encourage more Godly Play. This is because as human beings we are on a lifelong search for meaning. We need to tell and retell the lessons, not learn them once and discard them because we think we have understood the essential information contained in the lesson. We think and wonder about the lessons to invite more thinking and wondering about the lessons—all week long, even after the teachers and the children have gone home.

What we teach in Godly Play is a way of living in wonder, in “rapt attention or astonishment at something mysterious or new to one’s experience,” a third definition from Webster. In the Episcopal Church, at baptism, we pray that the person being baptized will have “an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love” and “the gift of joy and wonder” in all God’s works. This is not a prayer evoking traditional Christian education. This is not a prayer about wanting the baptized to learn information. This is a prayer about living in wonder. It reminds us that as people who encounter God, our experiences are always changing, and we are constantly looking for the meaning of our lives. We have to keep the questions open so we and the children can be open to all the new ways God is acting around and in us.

A fourth definition of wonder listed in Webster’s Dictionary is “effective or efficient beyond anything previously known or anticipated.” The Godly Play approach is truly a wonder. The way we use wondering questions to encourage the children to reflect on the lesson is effective in ways unanticipated by all of us. Yes, often as we wonder with the children, we don’t always immediately hear a verbal response. But posing open-ended questions after the lesson is just the beginning. Any discussion we engage in with the children as we sit in the circle is just the beginning of wondering.

Some of the children’s answers to the wondering questions appear during the individual response time. Those wonderings by the children are nonverbal. Expressions of what the children are “wondering” appear as some children use art materials to make something that shows how they feel about the lesson, or as other children work with the storytelling materials to retell the lesson. Even these visible responses, however, are just the beginning of their wondering.

Once, when I was telling my third grade Godly Play class the story of “The Ten Best Ways to Live,” I got no response from Susan when I asked the circle of children, “I wonder which of the ten best ways to live is hardest for you?” But Susan’s mother telephoned me on Wednesday to tell me that when she was in the car riding home from school that day, Susan asked her mother the same question: “Mom, I wonder which of the ten best ways to live is hardest for you?” Susan’s mother was astonished to think that as an adult, she had never been asked that question about the Ten

Commandments. The whole family talked about it at dinner that night. Now, that religious education was “effective or efficient beyond anything previously known or anticipated.” Godly Play is a wonder.

THE ART OF MANAGING THE CIRCLE

by Becki Stewart

GETTING READY

- Make the story your own.
- Ready yourself on the inside; be calm, confident, patient with the process and trust God.
- Prepare the lesson materials and the room. The environment is an unspoken lesson.
- Be clear about your role and duties in the Godly Play room. Communicate with the other teacher.
- *Model* how to enter the language.
- *Show* your love for the language.
- *Respect* the power of the language, the presence of God and the relationship of the child with the Holy One.

MAKING THE CIRCLE

- Begin at the threshold. Help children get ready *before* they enter the room.
- Greet and seat each child individually.
- Help the children make a circle. “Let’s make our circle big enough so everyone can see.” “Would you be the anchor today?” “Do you remember how to get ready?”
- Model the ready position: legs folded and hands on the lap or on the knees.
- Check to see if the whole circle is ready.

SETTING THE TONE WITH RITUAL

- Give an informal greeting and visit with the children as the children enter.
- Greet one another formally: “The Lord be with you. And also with you.”
- Change the calendar and recall where you are in the church year.

KEEPING CONTROL DURING THE LESSON

- Check your own attitude—calm, confident.
- Make sure each child and the door person are ready. Check the circle as a whole.
- Have clear expectations of behavior, consequences and procedures.
- Know the children and the lesson.
- Establish and maintain boundaries. Use language that is appropriate and respectful to the children. “Be ready.” “Only you can get yourself ready.” “Walk around his

space.” “What lessons are you telling in the desert box?” “When I tell the lesson, I move the pieces. Later this can be your work.”

- Find and develop your own voice and style. Be patient with yourself.
- Show children the act of making meaning by modeling the process.
- Invite children to enter the language. Don't erect barriers that prevent children from experiencing the presence of God.
- Model how you find your own meaning: “I hadn't thought of that.” “I wonder about that too.” “Hmm.”
- Show how you value this language, time and space.
- Remember, the story's meaning is deeply personal. It is not given by the teachers, but is discovered by each individual.

HANDLING DISRUPTIONS

- Consider the individual. Look for motive and consider the circumstances.
- Provide boundaries, but realize some children will test these limits. Work hard to provide a *safe* place to explore and discover faith and meaning.
- Jerome Berryman offers a five-step sequence for handling disruptions. (See pages 64-65 in *How to Lead Godly Play Lessons*.) Briefly summarized they are:
 1. Check your own involvement. Ignore the “small stuff.”
 2. Look up briefly. Pause and break from the story briefly. Address the whole group, “We need to get ready again.” Emphasize expected behavior. Hope that the child enters into the community by getting ready again.
 3. Specifically direct comments to the child, “No, that's not fair. Look at all the other children. You need to be ready too.” Use a neutral tone of voice.
 4. Ask the child to get up and go sit by the door person. “*(Child's name)*, please get up now and go find a place near the door person where you can still hear the story.”
 5. Tell the child, “It is time to go now. May I help you or can you go by yourself?” Although it is preferred that the child choose to go to the door person, if necessary, gently but firmly carry the child to the door person.
- Teachers are in control of this time. Boundaries apply to the work time as they do during the lesson. Make this time as orderly as possible, using a routine and organized environment.

INVITING CHILDREN INTO RESPONSE TIME

- Dismiss children one at a time to do their work.
- Children may want to hear the story again or wish to work with another lesson. They may choose a different story only if they have heard it before. Encourage them to ask someone else to tell them the story. They may also choose to “work on themselves” or take care of things in the room. Both choices are important and appropriate work.
- The door person assists the child *if needed* to find, gather and use materials