



Meeting Jesus with Young Children: Accompanying the Youngest Members into Christian Community

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What do you do when you meet someone for the first time in your life—or simply the first time in a day? You greet each other. You call each other by name. You probably swap stories and may even commit to doing an activity or playing a game together before leaving to take care of other responsibilities. God gives us such a greeting in Holy Baptism. At the font, God calls us by name, shares the divine story—our story, too—and we receive an invitation to participate in God’s activity in the world. Every morning after, we remember our own baptisms and the baptisms of our young children by making the sign of the cross and asking God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to watch over us and them. Every day we remember our baptism—that we are made new and that our sins are drowned through God’s grace. It was Martin Luther who taught this.

Greeting/calling, sharing stories, playing, and parting to take care of home responsibilities is a pattern of many childhood friendships. The pattern mirrors our liturgy: gathering, word, meal, and sending. It is also the way congregations and families introduce Jesus to children aged six and younger. And a very good case can be made that young children (who are also the church) introduce adults to Jesus, as well.

We invite young children into Christian community and the story of Jesus because Jesus did—not because they will be “future” church members, but because they are already fellow members of the body of Christ.

How do we make such an important introduction? Together with children, we meet Jesus, little by little, story by story, with expectations that are appropriate for our respective developmental levels. Children do not have to have a full intellectual understanding of a story to benefit from it. We realize that none of us come to know Jesus (or any friend, for that matter) in one day, but over time.

GREETING AND CALLING

The Little Lutheran, a twenty-four-page, art-based magazine produced by staff at *The Lutheran* magazine, helps children six years or younger to meet Jesus Christ, alongside parents, teachers, or other caregivers. Each issue greets a child and calls them by name (their name is on the mailing label, and each month one reader's photo and name appear inside the magazine). The mission statement on the website for *The Little Lutheran* reads: "God and the family of God love you very much....God will always be present in your life. And Jesus is your savior and your friend." We share the gospel with bright pictures, words children can understand, and invitations to play and to share in God's care for the world. In 2008, one child called this sturdy little magazine her "mail from Jesus."

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From birth through age six, children navigate a variety of stages that may be helpful for congregation members or a children's welcome committee to consider. (Leaders may want to consider sharing summaries of the theories of developmental experts like Erik Erikson, Lev Vygotsky, James Fowler, and Jean Piaget.) For example, adults in the nursery should know that infants and toddlers need to be able to trust that adults will respond right away to their cries and care for their needs. It may interest some members to know that when many parents begin teaching their babies sign language it decreases preverbal frustrations. Parents and congregational leaders can teach signs to accompany songs of faith (a monthly feature in *The Little Lutheran*), or "read" faith stories to infants and toddlers by pointing to art and by both asking and answering questions. Infants and toddlers, as long as they do not have other more pressing needs, will enjoy being the center of all this attention. Toddlers are generally able to sit for very brief stories. And over time, toddlers begin to associate the name of Jesus and the stories about Jesus with the warmth and love shown by the storyteller.

Children aged two to six have more self-confidence and play more cooperatively. They learn in a hands-on way that involves their senses, and they think in very literal, concrete ways. Jesus exists simply because their parents/caregivers say so. Faith-development theorists have found that children of this age learn best when aided by images, stories, and gestures. Jesus' love for the child cannot be

emphasized enough at this age, when the child is creating enduring images of what and whom she may trust. So we tell stories about Jesus in such a way that children feel confident and secure in his love. Yet in no way should the gospel be dumbed down, Jesus be made cute and fluffy, or Christians be presented as perfect. The very fact that we are encountering Jesus with children can give an even greater depth to storytelling and a deepening of our own belief in God's love and mercy through Jesus Christ.

The Little Lutheran seeks to do just that, offering congregations and families a way to talk about Jesus and the body of Christ with the young children they love. It began as a concept I had for helping godparents take seriously their vows as baptismal sponsors. I envisioned a colorful art-based magazine that Lutheran parents and other adults could use to nurture faith literacy. The stories and illustrations would build young children's knowledge of Bible stories and verses, simple prayers, Lutheran and ecumenical saints, the lives of children their own age around the world, and faith in Christ. This didn't begin to take off until nearly three years ago, when Sonia Solomonson (now executive editor of *The Little Lutheran* and writer of the "God is with us" ritual page) took a sabbatical to research what it would take to do this or other ancillary product ideas. Then *The Lutheran's* editor, Daniel Lehmann, looked at feedback from focus groups, crunched the numbers and decided we would invest in it.

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Sonia and I also researched whether there were other similar faith-based children's magazines. After all, in 1529, Martin Luther said he created his *Passional* with illustrations by Albrecht Dürer "for the sake of children and simple folk, who are more moved by pictures and parables to remember the holy stories than [they are] by mere words or dogma."¹ But nearly five hundred years later, we found no Christian magazines that covered our birth-to-six age group.

We knew that with some (hopefully only initial) sacrifices, it would be possible for us to provide a resource children and parents could use at home or in other settings. In one year, *The Little Lutheran* reached a circulation of more than 10,000 subscribers (half individuals and half congregations and groups)—going from being completely subsidized by *The Lutheran*, our parent magazine, to covering printing, postage, and the work of the artists, but not staff production time, which continues to be extensive.

Yet what a joy the work is! In sharing stories of Jesus with young children, we grow and our faith is nurtured by the way young children freely imagine. Amber

¹Cited in Ruth B. Bottigheimer, *The Bible for Children: From the Age of Gutenberg to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996) 25–27.

Leberman, our art director, has been able to hire artists to create original artworks with an eye toward historical and liturgical accuracy (for example, illustrations of Jesus as an older child during the visit of the wise men and the baptism of a child in an ELCA congregation). We've published rhyming poems that teach young children about Martin and Katie Luther, the Lutheran understanding of the Eucharist, and even about a little girl their own age who lives in Guatemala.

We work to give congregational leaders tools they can use to explain Lutheran theology without abstract or insider language, in a way that children or unchurched adults, for that matter, can understand. We are always aware that very young children use their senses to learn and think concretely, not abstractly. They may be able to memorize a theological concept and supply rote responses that please the adults they love. But they comprehend and need images and stories of Jesus (told in a way they can relate to their own experiences) as well as the consistent assurance that Jesus loves them and knows them by name. And when they see the adults who love them praying and acknowledging Jesus in our lives, they learn to come to Jesus later in life, in times of joy and pain. As John Westerhoff writes, "It is not so much the words we hear spoken that matter most, but the experiences we have which are connected with those words."²

CALLING ALL CHILDREN

Did Jesus' disciples mutter anything about the noise, the bouncing energy, the pranks, and runny noses when they tried unsuccessfully to keep the little children from getting too close? When Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me" (Mark 10:14), when he embraced and blessed children whose parents had been rebuked by the disciples, what relief those who brought the children must have felt! And Jesus didn't stop there. He went on to say, "Do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it" (Mark 10:14–15).

Joyce Ann Mercer argues that in Mark 10:13–16 Jesus is expanding "the bounds of membership in God's 'family,'" proclaiming "solidarity with—and not separation from—those who are the lowliest and the least, the most vulnerable to the hardships of imperial oppression....Jesus called on his followers to welcome, touch and bless those members of the society most precariously positioned, the children; not only 'their own,' but also the children of others." Mercer says that when the disciples are "ready to replace one form of domination with another...[and] restrict access to Jesus by those at the lowest rung of their culture's social status hierarchy," Jesus refuses. "Mark's story makes clear that the renewal of life with a new social order really does mean giving up all forms of domination, and not simply falling back into the same patterns they are trying to overcome," she writes.³ Jesus connects "the

²John I. Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1976) 92.

³Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005) 53.

divine reordering of power in social relationships (like a child, last and servant of all) and the social practice of welcoming children....[I]n the mission of Jesus, the practice of welcoming children stands alongside other practices (e.g., healing and exorcism) as manifestations of the reign of God. If these (or other) disciples seek God, they must welcome children.”⁴

Indeed, what a relief it is when a congregation communicates an unconditional welcome to those of us who parent young children. We need not struggle to keep children ruthlessly still or relegate them to the nursery, if there is one. Neither need we dread interventions by ushers or well-meaning members, wondering periodically why we didn’t simply stay home. In a congregation that welcomes children during worship, we know whom to sit near and which Sunday uncles or aunts are most likely to whisper, “What a good baby! Would you like me to hold her for a bit?” We know that our four-year-old’s sudden shout of “He’s talking about Zachaeus? I know that story!” will be greeted with smiles of understanding, while we softly remind him to use his inside voice. Suddenly it is not important that there are Cheerios under the pew, pieces of dried oatmeal on our pants, and one child has her shoes on the wrong feet.

“Of crucial importance is the sense that we are wanted, needed, accepted and important to the [faith] community,” writes John Westerhoff, of six-year-olds.⁵ This applies to all children. Our children know they matter when congregational members greet them by name, allow children to express themselves, and see themselves as growing alongside children. As congregational members, we show that children matter to us and to Jesus. For this reason, *The Little Lutheran*, a magazine for children, assumes a relationship with a trusted caregiver (that is, a parent, teacher, relative). The magazine is intended to nurture the faith of the child and caregiver and the relationship between the child and the caregiver.

Mercer writes that in Mark 7:24–30 Jesus hears and acts on the Syrophenician mother’s challenge to see all children as important—not simply one’s own children. This, Mercer argues, “disallows a symbolic idea of children (*tekna*, used to speak abstractly of descendants or progeny, or figuratively as when adults are addressed as ‘children,’ e.g., Mark 2:5, 10:24) to be used as the rationale for nonresponse and nonaction to a ‘real’ child’s (*thugatrion*, diminutive form of *thugater*, indicating endearment) concrete needs.”⁶ We must expand our ideas of Jesus with children to include all children, says Mercer, not just those who are “playing happily on Jesus’ knees and *looking* like gifts from God.”⁷ “The children in Mark’s gospel are often difficult to be around....They are sick, possessed, poor and ‘in the way’ of adults....For Mark, children and childhood are gifts from God, not because they are carefree, but because God has a purpose for children. God gives children to the

⁴Ibid., 51–52.

⁵Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* 94.

⁶Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, 61.

⁷Ibid., 63.

church and to the world so that God may be known.”⁸ Jesus’ welcome of children “constitutes a clue about the church’s need to listen to its children and youth, to take them seriously as already being disciples who contribute to the mission and work of the body of Christ,” Mercer writes. Additionally, children “are not only in the church to be educated for future participation.”⁹

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In other words, children are to be welcomed to church simply because they are God’s people, too, right now, and not for the adults they will eventually become. Nor are they in congregations or families for other reasons. Consumerism can co-opt families and congregations subtly. We are to value and welcome vulnerable children as Christ does, Mercer argues. Children are not welcomed based on their roles as consumers, their supposed innocence (often used as the basis for closeness to God, placing a terrible burden on children to measure up to the impossible), their ability to bring more adults into the church, or their ability to uphold an image of congregational vitality. Mercer warns, “The theological notion of welcoming children easily slips into advertising to adults through children.”¹⁰ We are to welcome and value children solely because they are our fellow members in the body of Christ, she insists.¹¹

Practically, this happens when congregation members and leaders do not begin to interact with a child by correcting “faults” (talking too loudly, running to the front of the sanctuary, swinging feet into the aisle), but by smiling or later complimenting a child on its strengths (for example, his faith that he is loved and accepted, her singing the hymn with the congregation, his ability to make friends, her help with a nearby baby, a visit he made, or something she created to cheer up a shut-in, and so on).

SHARING JESUS STORIES

Both congregational leaders and parents should tell young children simple, honest stories about Jesus in the Bible and Jesus in their own lives—and not just in children’s sermons or at Christmastime. And when young children talk about Jesus in their lives (if you do so, why wouldn’t they?), we must listen with interest and offer our own insights when we must. Under no circumstances should we as parents avoid such conversation because “they might not understand” or they “just won’t

⁸Ibid., 66.

⁹Ibid., 67.

¹⁰Ibid., 34.

¹¹Ibid., 110–111.

get it” at their stage of cognitive development. It is true that children do not need to know and are not ready for every theological concept or every biblical story. But they are ready to see Christ in how we allow them to come to us, to show us things, to be a part of the church, and to sometimes take the lead. And they will need to know Jesus to weather the tough times that will inevitably come to them in life.

What are some ways you can begin to share Jesus’ presence in the lives of children aged six and younger? According to Madeleine L’Engle, we should consider the kinds of “what ifs” asked by young children. “What if—the basis of all story,” she writes. “The small child asks all the ‘what ifs.’ All of life is story, story unraveling and revealing meaning....And the story involves what seems to the closed mind to be impossible.”¹²

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In addition to reading Scripture again and again, consider listening to the experiences of children in your congregation. You may even wish to spend time listening to children tell stories themselves, about any subject. What parts of their stories do you like? Are they more whimsical than you might normally be? Does spending time listening to them help you to open up their imagination, while not changing the biblical story? Would you like to also engage skills they may already be developing at home or school, such as counting or sequencing? What kinds of images or art can you use to help tell the story? Ruth Bottigheimer writes that illustrations “function in close partnership with text...provide internal exegesis and play a central role in resolving puzzles thrown up by the stories themselves.”¹³

Here are some examples from stories I wrote in 2008. The first is a retelling of the story of Jesus’ birth by imagining something a child might wonder: “Can sheep see stars, like me, at night? Are sheep surprised to see such light?”¹⁴ Three more sentences, and it was done.

This second example is a retelling of part of Paul’s letter to the Philippians: “Paul wrote a letter to Euodia and Syntyche. ‘Be friends,’ he told them. ‘Rejoice.’”¹⁵ Again, very young children don’t need the whole story, just enough to hear that other people have similar joys and pains and are also part of God’s story. (Yes, although developmentally children this age are very egocentric, it’s still good for them to hear this from you.)

Finally, in “Jesus makes 10 people well,” numbers became a way for children

¹²Madeleine L’Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook, 2001) 118–119.

¹³Bottigheimer, *The Bible for Children*, 57.

¹⁴Elizabeth Hunter, “Can sheep see stars?” *The Little Lutheran* (December 2008) 14–17.

¹⁵Elizabeth Hunter, “Paul wrote a letter,” *The Little Lutheran* (October 2008) 6–11.

to engage or practice counting skills. I asked Amber if the artist could draw numbers over each of the ten people (leprosy sufferers) coming to ask Jesus to heal their skin, then numbers over each of the ten people going away healed, and, later, a number over the one who came back to say “Thank you.” Few words were necessary, but across six pages we provided many entry points for children at a variety of developmental levels, including those who are just learning to count, those who are learning to write and recognize numbers, those who are learning to recognize “Jesus” written on paper, and those learning to recognize colors and patterns.¹⁶ With infants and toddlers, adults may “tell” the story by pointing to and talking about the illustrations in a children’s Bible or faith magazine. As Martin Luther once said, “we must talk baby talk” when we teach little children. Even more important than our exact wording is that the story we tell—the story our children tell us back—is God’s story of love. And it is good.

PLAY THAT STRETCHES

When we, as adults, play with children, we encounter God together. Together, as cocreators, we explore our faith questions. We can dance and drink pretend tea. We ask children questions and share our own answers as well. If adults have just read the story of Jesus telling Simon and Andrew to leave their nets and fish for people, and children are particularly antsy, adults may initiate a game. When the leader says “fish” or “person,” players can pretend to be happy fish that swim away free or people who are happy to be caught by the hands and told, “God loves you, and so do I.” When we play, quite often we think of things we wouldn’t have imagined if we were just using words. Afterwards, adults and children can talk about why both the fish and the people were happy that Jesus asked the two brothers to stop fishing in the sea.

One of the best-known developmental play theorists, Lev Vygotsky, taught that cognitive development comes through social interaction. He spoke of something called the “zone of proximal development,” which includes many tasks a child has difficulty doing alone. Through what later theorists call “scaffolding,” the child is able to stretch enough to succeed at those tasks by receiving directions or simplification from a grown-up or an expert child.¹⁷ For example, perhaps your child can do a seventy-five-piece puzzle by herself, but can also do a one-hundred-fifty-piece puzzle with some simple hints related to color or questions about shape from you.

Play is more acceptable than ever in congregations with young children, thanks to the Jerome Berryman’s “Godly Play” movement, a Christian education methodology inspired by Italian educator Maria Montessori. In “Entering the Story: Teaching the Bible in the Church,” Ellen F. Davis describes Godly play as in-

¹⁶Elizabeth Hunter “Jesus makes 10 people well,” *The Little Lutheran* (November 2008) 2–7.

¹⁷J. S. Atherton, *Learning and Teaching: Constructivism in Learning* (2001), online at <http://www.learningandteaching.info/learning/constructivism.htm> (accessed 6 November 2008).

viting to “wonder.” Wondering, Davis says, is a generous way for adults to address children as fellow learners and avoid “[reducing] the story to a predictable moral lesson.” Likewise, reenactment means that “even before they can read, these children have a responsibility for interpreting the biblical story and sharing it with others,” Davis says.¹⁸

So here is an assignment for you: Do you remember where you first heard about Jesus? What do you remember learning or thinking about him? Ask a young child in your congregation or family: Who tells you about Jesus? Who is Jesus? Listen to their answers, and share your own. Jesus meets children and the rest of us wherever we are, challenging all of us to grow from there. While we raise children in the faith, they transform and deepen our faith as well. Although adults have a necessary authority over children for their safety and care, we are companions on the Christian journey. We can say all we want about Jesus, but if we don’t embrace children as fellow members and servants in God’s kingdom—as Jesus did—then we miss the point. ⊕

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¹⁸Ellen F. Davis, “Entering the Story: Teaching the Bible in the Church,” in *Sharper Than a Two-Edged Sword: Preaching, Teaching and Living the Bible*, ed. Michael Root and James J. Buckley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008) 44–62.