

“We First” Supplement: for parochial and faith-based schools

Introduction

“When Jesus heard of it [the death of John the Baptist], he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself. The crowds heard of this and followed him on foot from their towns. When he disembarked and saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them, and he cured their sick.

“When it was evening, the disciples approached him and said, ‘This is a deserted place and it is already late; dismiss the crowds so that they can go to the villages and buy food for themselves.’

“(Jesus) said to them, ‘There is no need for them to go away; give them some food yourselves.’

“But they said to him, ‘Five loaves and two fish are all we have here.’

“Then he said, ‘Bring them here to me,’ and he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, he said the blessing, broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, who in turn gave them to the crowds.

“They all ate and were satisfied, and they picked up the fragments left over – twelve wicker baskets full. Those who ate were about five thousand men, not counting women and children.”

Matthew 14,13-21

The disciples were observant enough to note the hour and the hoards of people. They were probably getting a little hungry themselves and knew they had barely enough bread to satisfy their own needs. They did not dally too long before pointing out to the Rabbi that the situation was dire: remote place, huge crowd, and meager personal stores. Nor were they too bashful to suggest a solution: “Send them away.” Jesus’ response was prompt and pointed: the people can stay put; you feed them.

It was my Sunday preacher who first narrowed my focus on Jesus’ command: “Give them some food yourselves.” Why had I never dwelt on this line before? Have I been too eager to move quickly to the “miracle” part, the multiplication? Or perhaps, just as the disciples expected Jesus to send them away, I always thought it would be *up to the disciples* to follow Jesus’ command. Jesus’ directive was locked in a different time, in a far-away location. His words were intended for someone else until my preacher showed me otherwise.

There is another preacher who opened my eyes even more widely regarding this passage. Megan McKenna is an itinerant storyteller, theologian, author, lecturer, and spiritual director. She loves a good story and she knows more about the story behind Matthew’s words than I do. She wrote a book about neglected stories from the Bible with the title Not Counting Women and Children.

Some of her reflections will help us better understand the role of disciple, even when it comes to addressing the problem of bullying in parochial and faith-based schools.

Megan points out that Jesus had sought out a deserted place to be alone with the news of his cousin's sudden and cruel death. His disciples followed him, along with the many disciples of the Baptist. "Not counting women and children" puts the numbers of those in the wilderness at about 35,000¹ which is approximately the enrollment of students K thru 8 in diocesan schools in Cleveland.

Instead of keeping to himself to grieve the loss of John, Jesus saw the crowds and was moved with pity. He chose to respond to the needs of others instead of tending to his own. The pity Jesus experienced gave rise to a righteous anger over a needless execution and unnecessary suffering before him. He was driven to reach out to the crowds, refusing to let injustice triumph and a cry for mercy to go unheeded.

The disciples have two jobs in this story: distribute the food and collect the leftovers. In doing so, they come face to face with abundance, plenty to feed and plenty for tomorrow. The master was still teaching and the followers still picking up the pieces.

Megan the preacher draws some powerful lessons for aspiring disciples:

"Our tasks are simple and concrete: we are to learn to pity one another, even in the face of violence, political events, and our personal griefs. We are to spend our days curing the sick: listening, attending, speaking words of encouragement and hope, being present, giving our time and friendship, being with others throughout the day in our sorrows which are theirs sorrows as well. We are to take care that we feed others with our own resources, pooled together, even when it looks impossible, even when it's all we have and we need it for our immediate needs."

"Discipleship is about risk, about letting go and giving over what we have on behalf of others' needs, about sharing and being the first to move toward others and about giving generously and then blessing the gifts. It is about remembering to pick up the leftovers so that they don't go to waste. It means that intimacy with Jesus, the relationship of being a disciple, often means laying aside our own personal agenda and learning to pity those in worse condition than we are, and learning that intimacy with Jesus does not afford us instant access to him in our pain and suffering."²

Schools are predominantly communities of women and children. And they all count. In some schools, they are all that there is to count. There are no men except for a skeletal maintenance staff. It is they who are "taking care" and "risking" all day long, week after week, from semester to semester. The women and children model discipleship for each other, some from depths of experience, and others from tenuous starts and stops. But all are within reach to sustain one another in the wilderness, for those in search of healing are sure to come hungry.

Five loaves and two fish will always appear to be meager, but if they are “our own resources, pooled together,” they are enough to be thankful for and they will suffice “even when it looks impossible.”

What are we hoping for when we ask gospel-based schools to step up to the challenge of bullying prevention? Will it be our school’s turn to witness a miracle of loaves and fishes? Do we dare hope for something otherwise unexplainable such as a change of heart among one or the other of the bullies? Or would we settle for a transformation of the crowds, the masses, the ones we did not “count” on to infuse the entire school with a positive attitude? Jesus’ command to use what we have to address the needs around us may be all that is needed to prompt the faithful followers to reach into their stores of pity, courage, and resolve, and emerge with leftovers.

The “Heart of the Gospel” and the Soul of Bullying Prevention in Faith-based Schools

The study guide that comes with the “We First” DVD was designed to lead entire school communities through the process of building a bullying prevention program that will best suit their needs. Parochial and faith-based schools will need to wade through the same regimen of discussion and discernment to arrive at their own customized program. But these latter schools already have a firm foundation in place on which to build every step of the way – the word of God.

In many cases, words from New Testament scriptures grace the parochial school seal or motto establishing redemptive love as the binding force that will provide for all who enter there. The teachings of Jesus are as much a part of the curriculum as math, spelling, and reading drills. And because they are the guiding principles behind all school policy, they must be the stepping-stones for a bullying prevention initiative as well.

“We First” embraces the heart of the Christian message. It celebrates the God-likeness of all people and the communion that is ours because of the Incarnation and the Paschal Mystery. Our faith in him tells us that there are no longer any irreconcilable differences. We are all one in Christ. And the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit enable us, indeed challenge us, to continue the ministry of Jesus with the assurance that sufficient grace will be provided. What more could we ask for? What more do we need? We can move forward behind the “We First” banner because we have come this far by faith, and we are mandated to do even greater things. (John 14,12)

In order to examine the “We First” philosophy from the Christian perspective, I have chosen to rely on the wisdom and experience of Rev. Richard McBrien. He a preacher, prophet, and prolific writer, and currently the Crowley-O'Brien professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame. In 1994, I read his syndicated column in our diocesan newspaper. He said he had been taking questions from an audience when a young man approached the microphone and asked: “Dr. McBrien, what does it mean to be a Christian?”

His response was simple: “To be a Christian one must answer the call of the gospel.” The young man had an immediate follow-up question: “And what is the call of the gospel?” Fr. McBrien acknowledged that, too, was a good question. He promised to give it serious consideration and perhaps include his response in one of his weekly columns. He was as good as his word.

The short article, “The Heart of the Gospel,” described the encounter with the student and the scrutiny of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John that ensued. The result was twelve calls, a weighty number in the scriptural terms. Upon reading the article, I concluded that Dr. McBrien had done us a great service. With his vast knowledge of theology and his deep personal faith at hand, he listed what a follower of Jesus would have seen, day after day, from village to village, in the city or in the countryside where crowds would gather and Jesus would minister.

To be a Christian, we must identify with the very things that Jesus did. More than simply follow, we must *do* what Jesus did. It ought to be apparent to observers that our actions and exchanges are the words and deeds of Jesus. McBrien found many of the Gospel passages that captured Jesus’ teachings and his ministry and listed them. I have chosen these calls to be the lenses through which Christian schools can customize their bullying prevention program.

Beacon Street has reprinted this short list on the back of some of our business cards. There is just enough room. Seven square inches of “contact information” on either side. When we distribute these cards to audience members, we sometimes apologize for the crass self-promotion on the flipside of “Twelve Calls of the Gospel,” but we are just as quick to remind folks of the service we are providing. “There you have it,” we confess. “All you have to do to be a Christian printed in color on seven square inches.” The card is small enough to tuck away and keep for ready reference, or small enough to lose before the program is ended. Your call.

The Twelve Calls

1. The call to love one another.

There can be no surprise here. Love is first on the list. Love is the fundamental Christian principle because God is love. It is love that brings us into being, welcomes us into the reign of God, sustains us, and unites us to all that was redeemed by Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.

It is love that builds another school with a unique mission when one paid for by tax dollars is just two blocks away. It is love that prompts parents to make the sacrifices necessary to staff and equip a school in which the gospel will be the word of the day, the standard by which everything is measured, the motive, the message, and the mortar that holds everything in place.

Jesus said that our love for one another is the sign by which others will know that we are his disciples. (John 13,34-35) Love is undeniable, indispensable, and irreplaceable. But it is folly for us to profess our identity as disciples if there is not sufficient love for the world to see. It is one thing to hang a banner over a school entrance. It is quite another to nurture living banners of love among the student body, staff, and parent community.

The school that embraces love as its binding force paves the way for many possibilities: an appreciation of diversity, a readiness to serve, openness to reconciliation, sacrifice, inclusion, and witness. A staff that is more motivated by love than test scores will take the time necessary to resolve conflicts and build a student's self-esteem. Parent associations at parochial schools accept the challenge of re-creating, throughout the school building, what they have spent several years creating in their own home.

Families that choose a faith-based school arrive with greater expectations. As soon as they walk through the door, however, they commit to helping to fulfill the very mission that drew them. Every member of the body contributes to the wellbeing of all the others. That is the meaning of love. It makes all things possible, even the elimination of bullying.

And yet those problems persist, within sight of the banners, on grounds dedicated to God's Word. Something is lacking. Something is not working the way it should. Experience tells us there is plenty of energy. There are certainly enough eyes and ears to be watchful. And students have been attentive enough in religion classes to be able to quote the scriptures and engage each other intelligently in discussion sessions. And yet when it comes to intervening and reporting, the motivation and resolve that should be fortified by love dissolve.

According to McBrien, love comes first. But if our front line is weak, what can be said for what follows? There are many factors that contribute to the erosion of the impact love could make. We will take time to explore one of them here.

Elie Wiesel is a holocaust survivor who has spent the years since his liberation at the end of WWII searching for the answer to the question: "How could this have happened?" How could the atrocities of Hitler's regime have been conceived and carried out while the whole world watched? People said they didn't know what was going on even though entire apartment buildings were emptied before their eyes. They had no idea while the putrid smell of rotting flesh filled the air and ashes fell in their towns just a mile or so from the ovens in the camps. Fear of reprisal certainly played on people's passivity, but in the end, Wiesel says it can be attributed to one thing – indifference.

He says that the opposite of love is not hate; it is indifference. It is his belief that indifference gave power to the murderers. Indifference was (and is) the "perfect killer." "Indifference to evil is what makes evil strong," he said in an address in Cleveland in November 2007. "It is a denial of grace."

The word *indifference* comes from the late Middle English. It means "neither good nor bad." For the sake of our discussion, to be indifferent toward bullying is tantamount to refusing to see it as bad, while most of us would readily admit there is no good in it. We choose to be neutral when love demands that we act. How could we possibly justify our inaction? Wiesel has an answer.

In order to stay uninvolved, we must somehow diminish the impact of bullying and make light of it. We have to deny the clinical data and pass it off as part of growing up. "Boys will be boys!" we mutter. "That happened to me when I was a kid, and I turned out all right," we protest. But the holocaust survivor counters: "We must not trivialize." We cannot dismiss the brutality,

cruelty, or inhumanity. We must acknowledge the evil for what it is. No one has *a right* to bully another. It is absolutely contrary to the definition and purpose of school. And it has no place in a school that is founded on God's Word.

Elie Wiesel's concluding remarks in that November address can serve as our starting point as we secure a bullying free environment for our children: "I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented."

When a student asked Mr. Wiesel if he had a favorite quote, the noted author and lecturer responded without hesitation. "Of course," he said. "From the Hebrew Scriptures, Leviticus: 'Thou shalt not stand idly by.'" (19,18) The auditorium thundered with applause of approval.

May our love give us no rest until our schools are as safe as they can be.

2. The call to love even our enemies.

This is a call for us to love all those we left out of number one above. If the first of the twelve calls did not challenge us sufficiently, the second will certainly set us apart from the rest of the crowd. This mandate from Jesus' lips dropped jaws and drew skeptical glances. This was a line in the sand that only the most courageous disciples took seriously and perhaps only a handful of them were able to live up to. This is a call that takes a lifetime to achieve, but it puts all the others into perspective. So the sooner we try to tackle this one, the better. And remember: we are who we are by the grace of God. (I Corinthians 15, 10.) So ask for all the help you need.

"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you . . . If you love those who love you," Jesus said, "what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them." (Luke 6,27 and 32)

Just prior to this in Luke's Gospel, Jesus shared his Beatitudes (blessings and woes, verses 20-26) with his newly chosen twelve. This is what the reign of God should look like. And Luke encapsulates this long list of teachings with verse 31: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." This is the baptized version of "what goes around comes around." It leaves us the option of taking the initiative. We can generate what we want to see more of, especially in the direction of those who are at odds with us.

Bullies are people who mean to do harm, without letting up. They believe their targets deserve the abuse, disrespect, intimidation, and put-downs they heap on them. They behave like enemies, overtly or behind the anonymity of the Internet. These are the very souls Jesus calls us to love. Love may be the only thing that can transform their hearts.

Bullies can be apprehended, pulled from circulation, or eventually expelled from the school. Certainly everything should be done to put distance between bullying behaviors and those who are vulnerable. And a student bound and determined to be dismissed may eventually get his way. But "no tolerance" is not the same as "zero tolerance." Love must find a way.

Isn't there something a student body that is united by love should be able to do? Can't a school that chooses Jesus as a model find a way to protect bullies from their own destructive behaviors? If we can make room in the schedule for remedial math and find volunteers to tutor reading skills, we can certainly find time to model understanding, compassion, patience, and forgiveness — some of the many faces of love.

Our first step toward loving enemies must be a firm belief that hearts can change. When we concede that the grace of God is sufficient to enable students, teachers, parents, and staff to see themselves and others in a different light, we make room for miracle. Every spiritual writer has explored this phenomenon. Perhaps it can be likened to Gladwell's *tipping point*, a moment in which resistance and anger is overcome by acceptance and enlightenment. At the very least, when someone in the school community experiences a change of heart, new beginnings are possible. For everyone.

I recall a session with elementary teachers at the beginning of a school year when I asked if they had any experience intervening in a bullying situation. Most nodded yes. "And how did you treat the victim?" I asked. "We asked if he was all right. We protected him. We tried to comfort him." I supported their strategy and suggested how I would have felt safer if I had been the victim and had heard those words. And then I followed with a question about their approach toward the bully: "And would you treat the bully with the same sensitivity and respect?" "No!" was the answer in unison from several of the teachers. After a brief pause, I asked: "Why not?" There was only silence.

It was impossible to revisit all the episodes that had flooded the memories of those teachers. But each of them had been able to recall the tension of those moments, and the combined fear and sadness they had felt. It was not my place to critique their response, but I think it was valuable to suggest that both the victim and the bully would benefit most from an intervention that showed respect and sensitivity all around. That will take some thought ahead of time on the part of a professional teacher. That might even take a change of heart. Just as everyone will benefit from a cool and evenhanded approach, everyone deserves to be treated as a child of God.

Finally, it might be possible to make a case here for raising the bar for those who live by the Gospel. If there were any group that ought to be open to the challenge of loving *even* our enemies, it would be those who deign to follow in Jesus' footsteps. If someone has to be the first, let it be *we*. If someone has to look like the "fool," so be it. If anyone should be prepared *even* for rejection, it ought to be someone familiar with the Way of the Cross. After all, we have a whole communion of saints to fall back on should our efforts fall short of expectations. There is no excuse for not doing all that we can to foster a change of heart, in ourselves first of all.

An outspoken preacher of nonviolence, Fr. Emmanuel Charles McCarthy says as much: "Nowhere in the Gospels does Jesus teach His disciples that they can postpone living by what He teaches until the rest of the world lives by what He teaches. On the contrary Jesus teaches His disciples to obey His teachings in advance of the rest of the world. They are specifically chosen to lead the way to the Way! Otherwise Jesus would be teaching absurdity, namely, that His teachings (on nonviolence, compassion and mercy) cannot be lived until they are no longer

needed. If you do not have to ‘love your enemies’ until there are none, then Jesus’ commandment is rendered meaningless.”³

3. The call to forgive one another.

Forgiveness is a way of life for Christians. It is our voluntary participation in the overflowing grace of Easter. Forgiveness is our way of sharing with one another what we have received in abundance from a merciful God.

We take our lead from the story of the prodigal (Luke 15). Having come to his senses, the younger son picks himself up and heads for home. But he does so not as a son, but as one in search of employment. He does not feel worthy to reclaim a relationship with his father, or his brother for that matter. After all, he took his entire inheritance and left. Still broken and feeling ashamed, he is seen from a distance by a father who was longing for his return. He is forgiven before he gets his speech out, before he applies for a job, before he has the courage to look his father in the eye. That is how our God, out of breath from running to embrace us, forgives.

Forgiveness comes, therefore, not *after* excuses are heard or evidence is weighed, but *before*. None of that is required. None of it is necessary. Forgiveness is *unconditional* love. Forgiveness is a gift, not a receipt. And it not only pre-empts a change of heart, it makes it possible.

As members of a school community, it is our challenge to assume the role of the prodigal father, the wasteful and reckless father who lavishes forgiveness on his son, repentant or not. Our greatest hope is that from now on, those we run to meet will stay home. Will feel more at home. We watch the horizon for any sign that one of *our own* is within reach and we seize the opportunity to surprise him or her with forgiveness. What would our bullies do with that kind of reception? What would their response be once they recovered from being overwhelmed by love? Is there a better strategy if we want to win their hearts?

McBrien reminds us in his references to scripture: “Jesus said that we cannot ask forgiveness for our own sins unless we are also ready to forgive those who sin against us.” (Matthew 6,12) The *readiness* to forgive flows from the *willingness* to do so. Members of a school community need to adopt forgiveness as a way of life in the building, on the bus, and in the playground area. It should be celebrated as a “mark” of the school, a trait by which the school is known, a default that makes it as easy as possible for disruptive students to sort their way through to more acceptable behaviors.

Let’s be clear, forgiveness does not eliminate the need for discipline or adherence to school policy. It prepares the way for them. It communicates to the offenders that they do not have to dig themselves out of a hole; they merely have to be open to change their heart. That will prepare the way for making amends and reestablishing themselves as contributing members of the school. It may take time, but the goal is that, someday, they will be ready to approach the “older brother” and seek reconciliation on that front. That will require openness from other “members of the family” as well.

A Eucharistic people is quite familiar with this order of events. Our exchange of peace during worship is a public demonstration that all is forgiven. Indeed, we are told we may not approach the altar unless this is the case. (Matthew 5,23-24) So before we can presume to share in the fullness of the body, we must demonstrate our desire to be reconciled with the members. The call to forgive one another is our way of affirming our belief in the Body of Christ.

Children's Letters to God⁴ is gem of a little book. In the introduction, the author notes: "The letters in this book express that part of a child's world reserved for special thoughts and wishes." My favorite is the letter on the last page. It reads simply:

Dear God,
I am doing the best I can.
Frank

If I could be so bold as to answer on God's behalf, I would simply write back:

Dear Frank,
I would never ask for more.
God

I believe Frank would like to say the same thing to the principal, his teacher, and his parents. He would like his fellow classmates to believe he is giving his all. He may be a model student. He may just as easily be a troubled child who has not learned how to deal with his frustration without taking it out on others. He will have to learn how to forgive himself, and seek the forgiveness of others. That long process will likely get its start when someone shows him how it's done.

4. The call always to seek reconciliation with one another.

We have all had the experience of being present at a large reception, perhaps standing off to the side and surveying the crowd. Amidst the sea of many faces we catch the eye of good friends who wave and smile back from a distance. And as we continue to take in the panorama of small groupings, we are startled to see that *he* is there. *He* had bothered to come. We feel something in our stomach the moment we recognize that face. We feel unsettled, uneasy, maybe even disappointed. We didn't want to see him. Not here. Not now.

Sometimes, members of the same Body find ways to be at odds. Someone took offense or felt slighted; confidentiality was broken; perhaps an old, old wound was never healed. And just the presence of this other person is enough to disturb us. That's the bad news. The good news is we immediately know whom it is we must approach if we are to put this "absence of peace" behind us. Isn't it wonderful how our body can sometimes help us *feel* that something is not right? No?

Reconciliation comes from the *Latin* and it means to *bring back together*. That begs the questions: 1) When was it that the two or more were together, and 2) What caused the separation? It is as if we were staring at several pieces of a puzzle and a few open spaces too. We

had seen the picture on the front of the box so we knew what to expect. But whether it is fifty or five hundred pieces, a puzzle is never complete until that last piece is in place.

Reconciliation is the hard work that follows in the wake of forgiveness. If peace is to be restored, if we hope to approach the altar *en masse* bearing gifts, then an effort must be made to restore justice, make amends, and do whatever is necessary to address the bad feelings. This is more than courtesy; this is healing a Body that has been broken. This is the only path to wholeness, to holiness, to a peace that endures.

McBrien says reconciliation must be pursued, always. If, in the end, it is not achieved, it should not be for lack of trying. Ideally, multiple parties will pray for the grace to meet and arrive at a mutual understanding. But those are the best of circumstances. Sometimes, we must be content with the consolation Frank described above by honestly doing the best *we* can.

Even if it is clear that our actions did not cause the breach, it may be up to us to take the initiative. (Matthew 18,15-17) When our friends would understand completely if we could not muster the courage to approach the other(s), the example of Jesus does not let us rest. Our strategy may have to consider multiple extenuating circumstances, but the three simple rules for the “Group Juggle”⁵ provide some helpful guidelines. In order to safely and quickly transfer the beanbags from person to person in the circle, the one about to toss is obliged to: 1) call the [other] person by name, 2) establish eye contact, and 3) throw the beanbag in a catchable manner.

A person’s name is sacred. It is carefully chosen and it is the first spoken word from parents at their son’s or daughter’s baptism. When a person hears his or her name called, he or she presumes it was done so with respect. In the game of beanbags, it precedes the eye contact in preparation for the toss. Even in the midst of chaos, the calling of the name makes room for order, perhaps a restored order. The eye contact is a nonverbal agreement: “We will not look away until the toss is safely done. No blind throws. No one gets hurt.

Catchable manner takes care and focus. It is the final step. While there is no guarantee that the beanbag will be caught, no one will be able to fault the one who threw it. It will be an earnest best effort. The communication these three steps rely on should spell success in the Group Juggle exercise. The success or failure of the entire group literally relies on the intention and effort of every individual toss.

At the first instance of bullying, the Group Juggle of the school is in jeopardy. Reconciliation can begin if *we* intervene in a timely and respectful manner, opening the door immediately for a change of heart. When circumstances permit, we can call the bully by name. The eye contact that follows will be a reckoning between the offender and the rest of the school. The bully and his or her cronies will be looking back at a “We First” phalanx of well-intentioned schoolmates who intend to restore order before things deteriorate any further. The challenge is a thoughtful and rehearsed toss of an invitation to cease and desist. The incident could be over almost before it started. It doesn’t always go this well.

Other opportunities to initiate reconciliation can come after the fact. If bullies have been

identified and sequestered to designated tables in the cafeteria or restricted in class interaction, the other students can, nevertheless, maintain a respectful demeanor toward them, paving the way for a smooth reentry. “In doing this, [students] will heap burning coals on [their] head.” (Romans 12,21) Taunting and sniggering will only exacerbate the situation. Everything must be done to keep the atmosphere positive and supportive.

If policy is partnered with compassion and patience, the likelihood for success can be enhanced exponentially. Ultimately, the “We First” strategy is to overwhelm the bully with the majority’s option for justice and peace. If those who would prefer to be disruptive need a little more loving, so be it. The desire to seek reconciliation calls for no less. Why wait? Take the initiative. Don’t let it lie. Leave the door open. Lead the way. Make it easy for the other guy.

5. The call to renounce revenge.

“If anyone strikes you on the cheek,” Jesus said, “offer the other also.” (Luke 6,29) Only love could compel someone to embrace this command, and not just any kind of love is enough to get over this mountain. Scripture commentators are quick to point out that Greek gospel texts differentiated love in three ways. Two of them refer to that kind of love from which we derive the words “erotic” and “Philadelphia.” Neither of these measures up to Jesus’ expectations of his disciples. He is looking for *agape* love.

Agape love “means that no matter what [a] person does to us we will never allow ourselves to desire anything but his [or her] highest good. This love towards our enemies is not only something of the heart, it is something of the will. It is something which, by the grace of Christ, we may *will* (emphasis added) ourselves to do.”⁶

A principal in a local public school on Cleveland’s east side asks parents or guardians to sign two agreements at the beginning of each school year. One commits the adult to reading daily with the child to help the youngster read at or above the grade level. The other pledges: “I will never encourage my son/daughter to strike back or retaliate in any way, at any time.” The principal says the statements would remain filed in a drawer were it not for the occasional visit from a signer in the wake of an incident at school. Apparently everything changes when their child is reprimanded for retaliating. “What do you expect my child to do?” the parent protests. “Stand there and take it?” Signed statement be damned.

Turning a cheek is counter-cultural. Non-violent responses are nearly off the radar all together in an age when pre-emptive strikes are becoming the norm. So the call to renounce revenge is a challenge that will set Jesus’ disciples apart from the crowd, significantly.

The Rabbi Hillel (circa 2nd century BCE) was asked to recite the whole law while he stood on one leg. His answer was surprisingly brief: “What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow. That is the whole law and all the rest is commentary.” Jesus builds on this with a positive spin. “The followers of Jesus must go further. Jesus distinguishes what is good from what is merely right, and urges his disciples not be content with the lower standard. Duty is not enough. Duty obeys the rules, but love grasps opportunities. Duty acts under constraint; love is spontaneous and

therefore gracious. Duty expects to be recompensed or at least recognized; love expects nothing in return.”⁷

Living in the reign of God calls for *radical* choices, *rooted* in the very heart of God. Where else can we mine the pure and enduring love that can hold our anger in check? St. Paul reminds us: “But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.” (1 Thessalonians 5,8) Armor indeed. We will need all the help we can get. But the witness value is immense. Jesus makes no apology for calling followers to the highest standard imaginable. And he has no cause to do so unless he intends this witness to transform our surroundings. It will turn heads. It may even change hearts.

Renunciation of revenge, in the long run, is the safest and surest antidote to escalation. Indeed, revenge is the first layer of escalation that routinely ends in a state worse than the first. “Gotcha back” is a catch phrase on the playground. “Gotcha last” is a veiled invitation to the opponent not to let it rest here. In fact, retaliation is so much the expected pattern of behavior in our culture (not limited to school-aged children) that victims who fail to strike back are considered weak, “spineless,” or not up to the challenge. Could it be that those who refuse to retaliate are ridiculed because their courage casts an unseemly light on their accusers? Are vengeful people intimidated by those who hold themselves to a higher standard? Do they take sides with the majority hoping that sheer numbers will partially justify their choice of violence over peace? Is this how martyrs are born? The Greek word *martur* [μαρτυρ] means witness. The call of the Gospel is a call for more witnesses.

“We have too many men of science, to few men of God,” General Omar N. Bradley, Chief of Staff, United States Army, said in Boston on November 10, 1948. “We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount. The world has achieved brilliance without wisdom, power without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about war than we know about peace, more about killing than we know about living.

Louis Fischer quoted the WWII commander in his biography of Gandhi. “Gandhi rejected the atom and grasped the Sermon on the Mount. He was a nuclear infant and an ethical giant. He knew nothing about killing and much about living in the 20th century. *Only those who have no doubts can reject Gandhi completely.*”⁸

If parochial schools take McBrien’s fifth call to heart, the bullies among them will have less to fear. But if even half the energy that usually finds its expression through retaliation is redirected toward forgiveness and reconciliation, the troublemakers will be busy resisting all the attempts at peacemaking. Instead of pounding the bullies with heavy artillery, members of the student body will be hard at work disassembling all their weaponry. Strong, non-violent alliances will surround and protect the more vulnerable and shortcut the corrosive strategies of the bullies. Instead of fighting back, “We First” will simply disarm the few intent on causing grief. It will take planning and strategizing. But the time devoted to building and reinforcing a loving environment in the school will secure more time for teaching and learning down the road.

I recall sharing the Twelve Calls of the Gospel with some high school sophomores on their annual retreat. We read through the list and then I asked small groups to identify which on the

list represented the biggest challenge to them as a class, and as individuals. When the discussion was done and the kids were willing to share their thoughts, one remark from a young lady was most memorable. “Number five,” she said. “I’m supposed to renounce revenge.” Then with a pleading voice, and perhaps a little tongue in cheek she added, “But what if that’s my gift?!” Poor dear. I advised her to take it to prayer and use her creativity for other things.

6. The call to avoid judging and condemning others.

Adolescent youth have a hard time with this one. (They are not alone.) When they are challenged to find “the stumbling block” among the dozen calls from Fr. McBrien, number six gets the nod more than any other. Students spend a lot of time sorting out who is “in” and who is “out.” Verdicts come down hard on dress, manner, hair, choice of friends and music, family status, and GPA. (Imagine feeling pressure to choose between using the gifts God gave you by getting top honors and “dumbing it down” to average in with your “friends.”)

To be fair, some of the judging and condemning are the result, not just the cause, of poor self-esteem and a lack of confidence that plagues early adolescence especially. Often when kids are asked what they think or what they value, they spend more time looking left and right than speaking up from their own convictions. It is as if they need to draw an answer from a pool of thought, a consensus of opinion of their peers. Apparently it’s not cool to have things sorted out in junior high. It’s better to be undecided as a sophomore. *Tabula rasa* is a safety zone, the default of choice that permits postponement of commitment to a creed. Teachers: if your students are an exception to my observation, keep doing what you are doing.

Judging and condemning others has become prime time TV. Beginning with CBS’ “Survivor” and morphing into as many quiz shows as there are channels, participants pause periodically to send someone packing. Millions tune in to watch and, more than likely, weigh in with their own verdict. It’s one thing if a contestant can’t perform a stunt or answer a question. It’s quite another to have your peers judge your motives, your character, and your ability to succeed.

“Do not judge,” Jesus said, “and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. . . . First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye.” (Luke 6,37 and 42) I would be keen on removing the log from my eye just to be rid of the discomfort. But Luke’s Jesus suggests that we might also consider have our neighbor’s wellbeing in mind. Getting the logs out of the way makes it easier for us to serve. That presumes, of course, that serving our neighbor is on our “to do” list.

I believe it is fair to question those quick to judge and condemn if they are doing so with the best interests of the “defendant” at heart. The last thing we should desire is for someone to live up to our negative judgment of him or her. That will only serve to bring suffering to the Body, and when part of the Body suffers, the whole Body will feel the pain. What goes around, will certainly come back around. There is a Spanish proverb: “Whoever gossips to you, will gossip about you.” Those who are fond of judging and condemning should beware.

Question: “What is the difference between a stumbling block, and a stepping stone?”

Answer: “Where you put your foot!”

The statement someone reaches for to judge another is, at the same time, the very place “the judge” could begin to get to know the “would be” condemned. What we think we know about someone may be true, but instead of the information to tear down, it could just as readily be used to build up. Doctors often ask: “Where does it hurt?” If we already know where another student is hurting, it is all the easier for us to explore creative ways to ease the pain or promote healing. “Putting a foot” with the proper attitude can account for a step up instead of a stumble and fall.

I cannot resist asking students if they have ever passed judgment on a classmate only to discover later on that they had done so in error. It turned out they didn’t have the facts or that the report they had received and passed on was inaccurate from the start. “See,” I tell them. “We aren’t any good at judging. Condemning is not our strong suit.” And yet, we continue the practice. Perhaps we figure that if we practice long enough, we’ll get better at it. But I suspect that is not our motivation to begin with.

Bottom line: it’s not our job. Judging and condemning are not in our job description. Those are the sole domain of the person under scrutiny, and God. We are not in the loop. So let it rest.

Bullies might appear, at first, to be not only *worthy* targets of our judgment but *deserving* targets as well. After all, their antics fly in the face of school policy. If it weren’t for bullies, there would be no “We First” program. But the philosophy behind “We First” makes it clear: it is their behaviors that we reject, not the bullies themselves. Otherwise, zero tolerance would be justifiable and “one strike and you are out” would be the standard everywhere.

The *policy* is judgment enough of behaviors, overt or covert, that blindsides the unwary and undermines the spirit of the school. Those who intervene at the scene, report an incident, or forward an email to a school counselor are not judging or condemning, they are merely identifying negative and demeaning assaults on classmates, friends, or members of the Body. They do so to protect the victim and support the mission of the school. Charity is the motivation, not spitefulness. To do otherwise is to leave the voiceless even more vulnerable and allow injustice to go unchallenged.

It will take a while to weed our tendency to judge and condemn out of the school landscape. In the meantime, I recommend turning the watchful eyes and chastising tongues 180 degrees. Advise students, and other members of the school community, to take a long reflective look at themselves. Let them admire, first and foremost, the wonder of God’s creative handiwork. Let them be glad for their many gifts, responsible for their many talents, and grateful for their successes. Then perhaps they will be in a good place to address some of their own shortcomings, one at a time. Start with the least challenging first. Pray. Fast. Pray some more. But take the log out first.

7. The call to avoid self-righteousness, presumption, and resentment toward others.

Catholic Christians gather regularly to hear God’s Word and share a sacred meal from a table.

Many Christian congregations culminate Sunday worship with a communion service several times a year if not more often. Jews recall their passage to freedom at Passover, an annual ritual meal that unites them with their sisters and brothers worldwide. People of faith know they are connected.

Many cultures convene daily for a main meal, grand or small, to be nourished by the food from the table and by the love of each family member. I will never forget a story my sister told when she returned from a world tour. She and her husband trekked a dozen or more miles in Nepal and were welcomed by a humble family to eat supper from a common pot and spend the night under one large quilt of animal hides. (Hospitality at high altitude.) And I can recall my hitchhiking days when more than once I was rescued from despair by a fellow traveler who was looking to swap a story or two.

At those moments when we are dependent, hungry, weary, reflective, grateful, prayerful, desperate, or on the road, we are never alone. We may be the only person within miles, but our memory and imagination are racing from face to face, cherishing moments that still nourish us while anticipating the next encounter. We are inextricably tied to others, and they to us. Thomas Merton (1915-1968) said it better than I can:

“Only when we see ourselves in our true human context, as members of a race which is intended to be one organism and ‘one body,’ will we begin to understand the positive importance not only of the successes but of the failures and accidents in our lives. My successes are not my own. The way to them was prepared by others. The fruit of my labors is not my own: for I am preparing the way for the achievements of another. Nor are my failures my own. They may spring from the failure of another, but they are also compensated for by another's achievement. Therefore the meaning of my life is not to be looked for merely in the sum total of my achievements. It is seen only in the complete integration of my achievements and failures with the achievements and failures of my own generation, and society, and time. It is seen, above all, in my own integration in Christ.”⁹

In the seventh call, McBrien tells us to put aside three attitudes that reject our interdependence. *Self-righteousness*, *presumption*, and *resentment* toward others are three big words that simply deny we are no better than anyone else. While we are no less worthy of God's love, we are cautioned here from allowing ourselves to be duped into thinking we are God's highly favored, the elite, more deserving of the blessings of life. On the contrary, we are all members of the same Body, utterly dependent on the rest of the membership. (I Corinthians 12,12-26)

Furthermore, far from rejecting his weaknesses, Merton rejoices in his failures for the role they play in his life and in the lives of others. It is as if our ups and downs weave our life into the back and forth of the lives of others. We all end up being part of the same fabric. So our weaknesses and the faults of others are no cause for ridicule, they contribute to the overall strength we share as a community.

McBrien points out that Jesus repudiated the proud Pharisee (Luke 18,10-14) and the resentful elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son (15,25-30). He condemned those who try to bar

the doors of the reign of God so that others could not enter it (23,13) and said the publicans and prostitutes would enter the reign before their detractors would. (21,31-32) As if the charge not to judge or condemn others was not enough, we are now reminded “we are who we are by the grace of God.” (I Corinthians 15,10) God does not play favorites. Neither should we.

Bullies do not like call number seven. It is a direct affront to their motivation and method of operation. This call to “avoid” self-righteousness and resentment pulls the rug out from underneath them. The bully *presumes* his superiority; she believes her target is not worthy of respect. The bully contests that he or she has nothing in common with the victim, but nothing could be farther from the truth! Both rely on the goodness of God for every breath, every thought, and every grace they reach for. Both depend on the kindness and providence of others for the basic needs of life. And as members of the same school community, what one does to the other will eventually come back to haunt.

Nkosi Johnson (1989-2001) is spoken of briefly in the activity section of the “We First” program. He was the longest living survivor among those born with AIDS. At birth he was underweight, poor, HIV positive, and there was no father in the picture. His fate would have been similar to tens of thousands of others who fit the same profile were it not for the intervention of Ruth Johnson. She loved him into longevity, if twelve years is the milestone Jim Wooten says it is. Jim Wooten was an ABC correspondent who met Nkosi “on assignment” but could not just walk away. He returned to South Africa every time his travel schedule permitted to visit once again with this resilient and heroic little boy.

A short paragraph in the activity section explains why I include Nkosi in discussion about this call:

Nkosi Johnson spoke to the 13th International AIDS Conference in Durban in 2000, reminding the audience that AIDS victims were no different from other people: “You can't get AIDS by hugging, kissing, holding hands. We are normal. We are human beings. We have needs just like everyone else. We are all the same.” After meeting the boy, Wooten was compelled to write his story.

We Are All The Same is the title of Wooten’s short book, well worth the read. “We are all the same” is the reason Jesus commanded that we put aside self-righteousness, presumption, and resentment toward others. “We are all the same” is what I would say to a bully if I stumbled on him and he was in a reflective mood.

People who have lost everything in a natural disaster look around them in a shelter and mutter the same thing. People in AA sometime admit that those words aptly describe their thoughts when they began to put their lives back together. It will be a great day when those who formerly had engaged in bullying activities can utter “we are all the same” and realize in doing so they have not lost the battle. On the contrary, they will be on the road to victory, and their words will proclaim that they will not have to travel it alone.

8. The call to befriend those whom society looks down upon.

When introducing an audience to Fr. McBrien's list of twelve calls, I often get volunteers to take turns reading call after call while I slip some color commentary in between. When this call is read, I often ask: "And who is it that society looks down upon? We are society. We ought to know." The hands go up and the groups are identified: the poor, the homeless, addicts, gays and lesbians, and even the divorced.

It's always interesting when "we" identify "them" and I get the sense that we (society) are looking down upon them *from a distance*. It is quite possible that these generic groups are being named by students and adults who may not have had much association with those subject to their stares, and judgment. We may have had brief encounters outside the ballpark or heard about them on the news. They are statistics and segments of society, down on their luck. We may have surmised that some of them suffer from bad choices they have made or refuse to make. We have heard it said that they could turn things around if only they made the effort and "pulled themselves up" by their bootstraps. If only they shared our values and strength of character . . . We have all heard enough and seen enough *from a distance* to know that every one of "them" has a name, and a story, and relationship to God as real as our own.

Jesus said we have to serve them. McBrien chose the word befriend. In either case, we have our hands full.

Befriending is a very deliberate and conscientious path. When we see someone from a distance we want to meet, we make certain to inquire about contact information or look for a way to be introduced. We scheme and orchestrate a face to face meeting. And once there, we savor the moment, put on our best face, and let the other know how pleased we are to have met and how much we look forward to our next encounter. Befriending demands focus and resourcefulness, a willingness to sacrifice, an investment with a prospect for returns, all bound together by a large helping of self-interest. Now, take all this and redirect it toward those "whom society looks down upon." Behold the enormity of this challenge.

Jesus made himself the friend of outcasts (Matthew 11,19) and did not avoid their company. (Mark 2,16) So adamant was Jesus in his association with those "looked down upon" that the Pharisees, a group of observant and influential Jews, questioned his motives. Jesus was not deterred. Jesus said it was the sick who needed attention. He noted that the sinners were seeking what the righteous didn't think they needed.

The ease with which groups can assemble the list of those we often keep at a safe distance in no way makes our approach to their needs less difficult. We have prejudices¹⁰ to overcome and fears to address. To reach out to, let alone befriend, those on our list will certainly draw the scrutiny of those who are less willing to join us. But Jesus is convinced that we not only have something to offer but likewise have something to learn from this adventure. We read in Merton's quote above than no one is an island. Our lives are interwoven and intertwined and some of the suffering we witness may very well be due to our untying or efforts others have made to protect or insulate us from some of the coarser material of life.

A society that is not mandated by the gospel can be quite content to minimize its obligations and

relegate the needy to where the leftovers fall. But parochial schools and faith-based communities see things differently. In our schools, all are welcome. Among our families, every one is deserving. No one is “full” until everyone has been fed. No child is left behind, in fact.

Research and discussions about those we look down upon could keep classrooms busy for a while. Bulletin boards could be filled with reports and charts about *our* poverty, *our* homelessness, *our* addictions, and disorientations that have kept *us* from serving others. At the very least, perhaps some of our ignorance, fears, and prejudices could be put to rest.

Can we include “bullies” in society’s “hit” list? Is it possible that Jesus intended us to befriend those who delight in our misery, single out the weak, and pummel the broken even when they are down? Yes. In our schools, it is the one who bullies that needs help the most.

Instead of allowing bullies to cast a pall over the school, a vibrant “We First” approach could counter with cheerful and deliberate greetings and exchanges with the “intimidators.” The “fear factor” could be eliminated all together if the 95% of the school that rejects bullying kept up a positive atmosphere from arrival to dismissal.

We have all seen the huge “bubbles” that protect soccer fields, tennis courts, and swimming pools all winter long. They are held up not by tons of steel but by just a few extra pounds of air pressure. Air locks by doors and other built-in redundancies pretty much rule out a mishap that would bring the house down. If a little extra air pressure can raise a massive roof over a soccer field, perhaps a little extra “befriending” pressure could keep much of the bullying at bay.

Of course, none of this light-heartedness will take the place of the hardcore befriending that will be reserved for the “restorative justice” phase of bullying prevention. When options are down to just a few, *former* bullies will need time to establish trust with some of their peers. Re-entry will be awkward and tenuous, but it will be more likely to succeed if there are multiple and sincere efforts at befriending along the way.

9. The call to serve one another, humbly and unselfishly.

My travels take me to school gymnasias, church sanctuaries, an occasional auditorium and cafeteria, too. And often I get to begin my program with a brief word of introduction: “Hello, my name is Bob. I’ll be your server today.” It is reminiscent of what I hear at a restaurant when the young man or lady wanders over with menus or the free water. It’s a polite way of saying: “I’ll get you whatever you want.” It’s a veiled warning as well: “Stay out of the kitchen.”

Here Richard McBrien treats us to the short answer to the nagging question that haunts the conscientious Christian: “What does God want from me?” Answer: *service*. Start early; stay late. Do what you can. And whatever it is you would do for your friends, do *that* for others as well. Service is why we are here, on this planet, with these people, in front of this person. Service is a way of life.

Jesus gave us an example when he washed the feet of his disciples (John 13,4-15). It was a

thoughtful gesture in Jesus' day for a host (or his servant) to wash the feet of a visitor, but it was unexpected, to say the least, for Jesus to wait on his disciples in this manner. Peter objected until Jesus spoke:

“Do you realize what I have done for you? You call me ‘teacher’ and ‘master,’ and rightly so, for indeed I am. If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do.” (John 13,12-15)

I have had the good fortune to be part of “Faith and Sharing”¹¹ retreat programs during which foot washing was included as part of a reconciliation service. Participants sat randomly in circled chairs having no idea that when they chose their seat they were also determining the order of the washing. Feet can take a lot of abuse over the years, and there aren’t that many adults who are willing to “hand over” their feet to a stranger. (Perhaps this is the truer meaning of the *Peter principle*?) But the whole experience can be transforming. It can be both awkward and graceful as retreatants manage pitcher and basin, towel and toes. This was often the most unforgettable part of the retreat experience.

Over the years I have learned that youngsters can learn quickly from experience if activities are followed up with enough time and questions. The simple exercise with the peacock feather balanced on an open hand brings home the understanding that it’s all about focus and a willingness to move. Likewise, service is a very efficient way of planting the seeds of the Good News in soil that will nurture growth. (Luke 8,5ff) Sermons oftentimes fall on footpaths and the stuff of religion classes can readily take on the appearance of birdseed. But emersion into a class service project can be all together different.

Comfortable surroundings are gone and the believers are left to fend for themselves. They will have to learn names, perform a task, be part of a team, collaborate with “strangers,” and give of themselves. They will be working on others’ terms and on others’ turf. The “servants” will have to adjust to new surroundings and accommodate to the needs of those they came to serve. Having volunteered to kneel in imitation of their teacher and master, these disciples will be “face to feet” with those in need. Their minds will be racing to keep up with their heart. They will see and hear everything, record it all, and play it back again and again once they have returned to more familiar and more comfortable surroundings.

When volunteers have returned to the classroom, it is important that teachers allow enough time for students to reflect on their service experience. Writing and journaling will give everyone an equal opportunity to note memorable moments, name names, and list some things they did not know until they had jumped in to help. Pen pals can be arranged to keep new friendships alive. Questions that linger will serve to direct further research, suggest future service projects, or prompt letters to local, state, or federal legislators. “Foot washing” can provide a whole new perspective on life, even for those who are just getting started.

Bring the bullies. No one is exempt from the call to serve. And be careful to point out that *this* service is not retribution for harm caused to victims along the way. Instead, let those who have been disruptive be on the front lines in reaching out to the needy. Let them work side-by-side

with those who will probably be more eager but no more able to make a positive impact. Recall that McBrien says the call is to “serve one another, *humbly* and *unselfishly*.” The experience is likely to be humbling, for all the participants. Humility has a way of finding those who need to wear it most. “Unselfishly” will be everywhere for the bully to see if the project is truly designed to lift up the poor and the lowly. There will be no room for “put-downs” here.

Those who had previously been engaged or entertained by bullying may have the most to learn and the most to share from opportunities to serve. All of their “controlling skills” will have been re-directed. Cooperation and collaboration will have been the order of the day. Bullies may even have seen smiles and heard words of gratitude *directed toward them* from folks who had no knowledge of their troubled past. Service is “new ground” for kids who desperately need to learn new behaviors. Service may be the saving grace for conflicted youth who didn’t think they had anything worth saving. Service may be the answer to many prayers at once.

There is a delightful book for all ages that falls gently into place here. The Three Questions, written and illustrated by Jon J. Muth, is simply beautiful. It provides the perfect canvas on which students, teachers, staff, and parents can brush the many colors that come to mind when reflecting on the faces and the circumstances where service, great and small, has been provided.

A novice could read the book through in a matter of minutes. But the artwork and the struggle of the youthful main character suggest a slower pace.

“Young Nikolai seeks counsel from Leo, the wise old turtle who lives in the mountains. He is sure Leo will know the answers to his three questions. But it is Nikolai’s own response to a stranger’s cry for help that leads him directly to the answers he is looking for.”¹²

“Remember then that there is only one important time, and that time is now. The most important one is always the one you are with. And the most important thing is to do good for the one who is standing at your side. For these, my dear boy, are the answers to what is most important in this world.”

“This is why we are here.”¹³

10. The call to serve the poor.

The words “to serve” won’t go away. Fr. McBrien will keep them before us for just a little longer while Jesus shifts our focus to the “anawim.” *Anawim* is the plural form of the Hebrew word that has a number of translations: the poor, the afflicted, the humble, the meek, and today we will include the voiceless, the refugee, and the bullied.

“In a wonderful foreshadowing of [Matthew’s Beatitudes], the prophet Zephaniah (2,3; 3,12-19) relays God’s message that, even in the worst of times there will remain ‘a faithful remnant’ in our midst. God’s Remnant, then, are the people who find their security and treasures, not in the trappings of the material world, but in God. This faithful remnant, the *Anawim*, guarantees the

future survival of all God's people, by containing within themselves the very keys to the kingdom itself. For is it not in how we treat and welcome the *Stranger at the Gate*, 'the least of these,' which truly bring us into the very meaning and heart of Christ."¹⁴

So the poor are not here just to keep us occupied or focused on other than our own needs, they are our path to salvation. Already living in the reign of God, they welcome us into their midst to see things as God sees things, to forsake all else.

Our Baptism welcomed us into God's reign, the fullness of which lies beyond our death, "the veil which is stretched over all nations." (Isaiah 25,7) We are *supposed* to see things differently. We value the things of this world only in so far as they serve the needs of all. Material possessions, indeed, even our talents are ours to be shared for the wellbeing of the whole Body. Jesus' command is direct and uncomplicated:

"When you give a banquet," he said, "invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." (Luke 14,13-14)

"You will be blessed *because* they cannot repay you." Was Jesus trying to slip something by us, or is there no better way to insure our service is *total gift* than by rendering it on behalf of those who have no way to repay us. Apparently Jesus would have us serve the poor precisely because they cannot pay us back. This is called "sacrifice" rather than a "gift exchange." It might not feel comfortable, but it should feel like love.

McBrien adds: "Jesus singled out the poor in the Beatitudes, insisting that the reign of God will be theirs (Luke 6,20), as did Mary in her Magnificat: 'He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.' (1,52-53) Jesus' parable of Lazarus and the rich man (16,19-31) is particularly compelling. Indeed, the beloved Pope John Paul II frequently cited it in summoning the Church to the service of the poor and the powerless."

Our schools *are* our banquet tables. We open the doors to all who desire to learn. All can come as they are, and we earnestly endeavor to teach on a level playing field so that the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind will feel as welcome as everyone else. Whether those challenges are real or metaphorical, our faith-based schools are founded on a mandate to imitate the Christ who gave thanks and broke bread for everyone, not because they were wellborn, but because they were hungry.

The parents who sacrifice to provide these facilities expect as much. They built the schools and support the staff. And what those mothers, fathers, and guardians seek for their own, it is reasonable to provide for every other child. Occasionally, we encounter some students whose hearts are not always aligned with the mandate. But the bullies are "in the building," so we are obliged to serve them too. And because many of them are poor, Jesus would have them move to the front of the line.

Poverty has many faces. Besides the lack of material wealth, there are those who long for self-

esteem, confidence, hope, or a sense of security. They are hurting for devoted parents, credible role models, true friends, a break from their past, and something to strive for that is within reach. These are not the students who retreat to the fringes and beg for our assistance. They are instead the students who hide behind the pretense of needing nothing more at all. Some of them come off as self-assured, in control, even “cocky” at times, as if they were on top of the world. But what we see is a shell, a sham, perhaps even a shambles of what or who they would rather be. Some bullies are harder to spot than others.

But all of them are poor. If they do know how to love, they refuse to try. Their impoverishment is their imprisonment. It may be they feel safer there, protected from the uncertainty and vulnerability of living intimately in the reign of God. But it is incumbent upon us to visit the imprisoned, regularly (Matthew 25,31-46), to serve them where they are. How fortunate for them that they have deigned to enroll in our schools. It makes their conversion easier all around.

If we want to look for a modern day model of service of the poor, we can begin and end our search with Dorothy Day (1897-1980). Robert Ellsberg includes Dorothy in his All Saints. He writes that she was “thrilled” with the stories of the saints and the “nobility of their giving.” But she also wondered: “Where were the saints to try to change the social order, not just to minister to the slaves, but to do away with slavery?”¹⁵ James Martin, SJ also included this controversial heroin among his shorter list of the saintly in My Life with the Saints. “But even as she embraced Catholicism, Dorothy was troubled that the church, though often a haven for the poor, nonetheless seemed blind to the systemic causes of poverty.”¹⁶

Both authors suggest that Dorothy Day wanted to get to the bottom of things, but not to the degree that we should pass up opportunities to serve the poor in our quest for the causes:

“We need always to be thinking and writing about poverty, for if we are not among its victims its reality fades from us. We must talk about poverty, because people insulated by their own comfort lose sight of it. And maybe no one can be told; maybe they will have to experience it. Or maybe it is a grace which they must pray for. We usually get what we pray for, and maybe we are afraid to pray for it. And yet I am convinced that it is the grace we most need in this age of crisis, this time when expenditures reach into the billions to defend ‘our American way of life.’ Maybe this defense itself will bring down upon us the poverty we are afraid to pray for.”¹⁷

11. The corresponding call to beware of riches and the attachment to possessions.

I have heard that it is possible to catch a monkey using only a small-mouthed jar and a banana. The jar is anchored to the ground or a log and the banana is slipped inside. And then you wait. The monkey will approach the jar, reach in, and grasp the banana. At that point, all you have to do is step up to the jar and grab hold of the monkey. Apparently, the monkey will suffer capture rather than surrender the banana.

Is there a lesson in this for us? Does McBrien know enough about behavioral psychology to

suggest we will go for the banana even if it meant losing our place in the reign of God? Or is he simply passing on the wisdom of the Rabbi. What did Jesus see that prompted him to caution those with noticeable wealth?

Jesus said it would be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter into the reign of God. (Mark 10,25) This appears to be hyperbole at its best. But there was a smaller gate into the Old City through which a loaded camel could pass only with great difficulty. Perhaps he was leaving a little wiggle room for the wealthy.

Jesus also stated that those who would be his disciples should be ready to sell all that they have and give to the poor. (10,21) This could be a matter of practicality for an itinerant preacher and his followers who would sometimes have to walk long distances on short notice. But both teachings challenge us to weigh carefully what we need to get by in the rarified atmosphere of the reign of God, short and long-term. Elsewhere, Jesus makes it very clear if detachment from riches turns out to be too big a challenge: “But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.” (Luke 6,24) No room in the inn!

So much stuff. We know there is too much when we have to pack up and move from one city to another. It is then that we have to haul everything, piece by piece. It is then that we either justify bringing it along, leave it behind for someone else, or discard it all together. It is when we move that we discover we have more than we need.

The call to serve the poor offers a timely solution for the disposition of our unwanted or unnecessary treasure. But I heard a speaker in 2006 who suggested the problem may be more about culture than clutter.

As part of our education ministry at my home parish, William T. Cavanaugh offered a workshop on “The Theology of Consumerism.”¹⁸ Cavanaugh is a theology professor at the University of Saint Thomas in St. Paul MN. He clarified that consumerism is not about “having” but about “having something else.” It is about “shopping.” It is all about looking for the next item(s) even before the last purchase is out of the bag. It’s a kind of spirituality where no matter how much we have in hand (our earthly existence), we are always looking beyond the horizon (what awaits us in heaven). We are drawn by the logos and the brand names. Instead of pilgrims on a journey, we are tourists trolling for whatever attracts our attention. And then, “cha-ching,” it is ours.

There is a restlessness that comes with our pursuit of happiness if fulfillment ultimately rests in what we have or want to have. A dear friend of mine is fond of asking the question: “How much is enough?” Dr. Cavanaugh seems to make the case that consumerism is a virus that *consumes us*, clouding our view of the reign of God and all its simplicity. If we are truly immersed in God’s reign, won’t our attachment to things dissolve some or disappear? It was Saint Augustine who said: “Our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” McBrien may have identified another of Jesus’ litmus tests for membership in the “place” where he reigns and we live unencumbered.

It should “reign” in our schools. Well-equipped or bare bones, our buildings surround young and old who work tirelessly to establish and maintain an environment of love, forgiveness, joy, and peace. Regardless of the *clutter* that may be there, the “residents” build a *culture* in which all are

respected, cherished, supported, and nurtured. On good days, it should “feel like heaven.” And on the other days, heaven should still be within reach. Our parochial and faith-based schools are destined to be a sign to the world that a community that remains open to the Spirit and focused on its mission can keep its balance, by the grace of God.

But even “gospel” schools can be tempted to serve those who are more likely to succeed, and let others fend for themselves. If administrators could jettison troublemakers, they would free up time and resources for other “more deserving” students. Teachers may find it difficult to set aside blocks of time for class meetings when the school week provides barely enough time to meet curriculum demands. Parents have been known to demand that bullies who threaten be expelled on the spot when the safety of innocent children is in jeopardy. And how forgiving can we expect students to be when careless classmates destroy property, are the cause for the loss of privileges, or routinely disrupt precious recreational activities?

Instead of being lured away from the task at hand, a school committed to the “We First” philosophy will stay focused and include those who bully, stopping unwanted behaviors and modeling better ones. Rather than gazing in the direction of the horizon, they will be watchful for any and all signs of bullying, especially the more subtle episodes of exclusion or gossip. Students who are taught from an early age that full participation and inclusion are riches everyone deserves will not be easily distracted by treasures that do not last. They will learn that attachments can be cumbersome during a school day when circumstances may call for quick action to support a sister or brother in need.

A final thought comes from a young lady named Alison. She is quoted along with dozens of other children in a gem of a little book that includes the candid and compact statements about heaven and hell, and what living in the reign of God might be like. She says simply: “If you never get born, you never have to die. But you miss a lot.”¹⁹ When I share this tidbit of wisdom with adult audiences, I ask them to reflect for a moment and come up with what it is they would miss most of all. Then I suggest that, with the time they have left, they work at being very grateful for that particular blessing.

When it comes to the students in our parochial schools, I wonder how many of them would miss the clutter. And how many would miss instead one of the best days in their recollection, a day they helped to create, by the grace of God.

12. The call always to be just in our dealing with others.

I still remember my son’s first words. He blurted out “Mom” one morning at breakfast. I worked with him for the rest of the day on saying “Dad.” And within a week his vocabulary included his first phrase: “Not fair.”

I may be exaggerating some, but I believe the “sense of unfairness” is something that most people feel early on. But if we have a sense of when things are not right, there must have been a moment when what *is* right and just was imprinted on us. Attentive parents and guardians will no doubt have sought diligently to provide for our needs, anticipate our wants, and attend quickly to

our mishaps. They would have intervened against any attack, great or small, and assured us that they will be watchful against further threats. And loving parents would begin to correct us and even chastise us if they felt our actions warranted a reprimand. Informing us of the rights of others would soon become as important as protecting our rights. We learned that fairness is a shared value, a concern of the greater community.

It may not be written down anywhere, but my experience tells me that siblings are a critical factor when it comes to understanding equality. I was one of nine. Being second oldest meant that I grew accustomed to getting half of whatever my brother got his hands on. But before long, my pecking order dictated that I would have to further divide my portion with younger siblings. The tables had turned. And I recall a short lesson on precision when I observed my twin cousins sorting out how the final piece of chocolate custard pie would be shared: “You cut,” one told the other. “I get first choice.”

Once we find ourselves spending more time with neighbor children or arriving at school on a regular basis, we learned that justice has to do with respecting the rights and property of others. We learned to respect others’ wishes and their “personal space.” Both of my children attended Montessori school from age three. I was amazed to hear them talking about their “work” at age four and expressing concern about how other children would sometimes encroach on their work space. At some point, therefore, we ought to be able to move beyond what is ours personally and begin to consider our obligation to respect and protect the space, the work, the property, the contribution, and the personhood of others, especially those who are less able to do this for themselves.

The word *justice* comes from the Latin *jus* which means *right* or *law*. “Right” is the first meaning, the foundation upon which laws are written and upheld. Looking up the word *justice* in a Latin dictionary will take you to yet another word: *aequitatis*, which means equal. Our sense of justice flows from our being equal in the eyes of God to all people, regardless of our state at birth, physical ability, mental prowess, or physical appearance.

McBrien reminds us that Jesus attacked the Scribes and Pharisees for straining at gnats and swallowing camels, for neglecting the weightier matters of the law, including justice first. (Matthew 23,23) For the sake of our discussion, policy and rules, procedures and documentation are in place to protect the rights of everyone, including those who choose bullying at this stage of their education. Who knows what burdens they are carrying already? How can we possibly be serving their needs, a charge mandated in the school mission, if we expect more of them than they can provide? Before we can say justice has been done, we must explore all the factors that may have contributed to the uneven and unfair playing field on which bullies and their victims do battle.

If a child has been deprived of an equal share for much of his life or has never been *shown* that he or she has rights, it is very possible if not likely, that his sense of fairness will be skewed or immature. Barbara Coloroso²⁰ says that bullying “Runs in the Family,” the title of Chapter Five in one of her books. Children are a product of their environment. As they grow, if their surroundings are devoid of what is just and right and equal, how can we expect them to have well-formed values and socially acceptable behavior when they show up for their first class? So

in our “ideal” environment, the students who have been blessed to have parents, guardians, neighbors, and friends who value justice will be the “primer” from which those prone to bullying can learn the meaning of equal, fair, and right.

The United Nations published the Declaration of the Right of Human Beings in 1948. In 1989, that same international body adopted the Convention on the Rights of Children. The major headings included *survival, development, protection, and participation*, four topics that have been the focus of this project from page one. Ratification was the next step, which formally bound governments, on behalf of all people in that country, to meet the obligations and responsibilities outlined in the Convention. Ironically, the USA and Somalia are the only two nations who have yet to ratify the childrens’ *bill of rights*. Robert F. Drinan, SJ (1920-2007) once pointed out that the US was hesitant to sign on because required reports would document that there are many poor and undereducated children in the wealthiest nation on earth. Accountability makes for better justice.

It would be a healthy exercise to invite students to research and discuss the many elements of the Convention.²¹ Older students could pour over the original document²² and compare it with the Universal Declaration of 1948. Don’t be surprised if some students wonder out loud why the UN would have to go to the trouble of drafting a document that appears to state the obvious. It could be that most students in our school *presume* that these rights are as respected elsewhere as they are in the USA. I was preparing a group of high school students for the Sacrament of Confirmation just a few years ago, and I mentioned that I had written to our ambassador to the UN to ask why our country had not ratified the Convention. They were nonplussed. Having heard nothing from our UN delegate, I wrote to my state senator who said it was up to our President to seek ratification. I reported back to the Confirmation candidates that my letter writing was ongoing. Several of them asked me what this had to do with the Sacrament. “Why are you bothering to write to the President?” At that point, it was I who was baffled. The connection was obvious to me: there were children at risk, here and abroad, and those who were charged with overseeing their welfare were delinquent. Writing a letter was the least I could do.

Called “always to be just in our dealings with others,” we have the option to infuse into every situation the fairness that will guarantee everyone’s rights, their equal status under the law and in the eyes of God. It is the least we can do in imitation of Jesus, even when others would let us get by with less.

Conclusion

“We must work to make that kind of society where it is easier for people to be good.”²³ If Dorothy Day wrote that in her diary, she must have thought it was possible. She would certainly have demanded that of herself before she expected it of others. She would have approved of Richard McBrien’s list of calls; Dorothy knew the heart of the gospel and she strove to live as a worthy follower.

Jesus told the disciples: “Give them some food yourselves.” He wanted them to know they were capable of addressing the need rather than send it running. His strategy was to build their

confidence by extending a challenge. But the disciples were overwhelmed. At the very least, however, they observed everything he did with their “eyes wide open.” When all was said and done, the people were satisfied and a lesson had been learned, all because there was at least one believer in the mix, a master and a teacher named Jesus.

His message to us: we can feed them too, if we want to. There is enough bread in every school, every day, to account for a dozen baskets. And those are just the leftovers. The sooner we bring our resources to be blessed, the better. The sooner we embrace the fullness of our mission, the more prepared we will be to build sturdy walls to protect and provide for everyone within.

With Jesus charge “to feed” still ringing in our ears and McBrien’s calls to guide our steps, we can return to the business of education, formation, and plenty of reconciliation. Every member of our school community can assume a “We First” spirit, not just a “can do,” but a “will do” mentality to promote a just and charitable environment throughout. “When you have done everything you were told to do, you should say: ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’” (Luke 17,10)

Notes

1 McKenna, Megan. Not Counting Women and Children. Orbis Book, NY. 1994. Page 8.

2 Ibid. Page 17

3 Emmanuel Charles McCarthy is a priest of the Eastern Rite (Byzantine) of the Catholic Church. He was formerly a lawyer, university educator and founder and original director of The Program for the Study and Practice of Nonviolent Conflict Resolution at the University of Notre Dame. He is also a co-founder of Pax Christi-USA. For over forty years he has directed educational programs and conducted spiritual retreats throughout the world on the issue of the relationship of faith and violence.

4 Children’s Letters to God by Stuart Hample and Eric Marshall. Workman Publishing, NY. 1991. Also of interest, Kids Talk About Heaven by Eric Marshall. Crown Publishers. NY. 2003

5 Group Juggle is a group game found in the Appendix of the study guide.

6 The Gospel of Luke, William Barclay. The Westminster Press. 1975. Page 79.

7 Saint Luke, G. B. Caird. Penguin Books. 1963. Page 104.

8 The Life of Mahatma Gandhi. Louis Fischer. Harper Colophon Books. 1950. Page 349.

9 No Man Is An Island, Thomas Merton. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. 1955. Page 16.

10 While reflecting on McBrien's call to befriend, I recalled a 16mm movie I had seen (and eventually used) on the subject of prejudice. I believe the original film title was "The Eye of the Storm." It was a documentary journey into the classroom of a teacher from Riceville, Iowa. She began her crusade on 4 April 1968, the day after the assassination of Martin Luther King. In an effort to give her fourth-graders (all white) an experience of prejudice, she arbitrarily chose the color of their eyes as a way to separate and then discriminate against them.

The reactions of the children over the two-day experiment were as candid as they were innocent. That became very clear when, on the morning of the second day, the teacher told the students that she had made a mistake. All the terrible things she had said about brown-eyed children the day before were actually true about the blue-eyed students. So she instructed that all the freedoms and restrictions would have to be reversed. Oh what a difference that made.

At the end of the exercise, Ms. Elliot gathered the children and told them that none of the differentiating characteristics made them better or worse than others. None of the terrible things she had said about them were true. The children immediately sprang back into life, hugged each other, and danced for joy.

Since then, her exercises have helped to educate children and adults in all forms of racism and bigotry. After the documentary aired, she faced violence and death threats to herself and her family. She has been subjected to every kind of intolerance and prejudice that she strives so hard to speak against. You can read more about her by searching: *The Eye of the Beholder* – Jane Elliot: Blue Eyes, Brown Eyes.

11 In 1968 Jean Vanier, a former philosophy teacher at St. Michael's University in Toronto, was invited by the Bishop of Toronto to give a retreat for priests. At the time, Jean Vanier was living in France where he had founded the L'Arche Community.

Jean Vanier agreed to give the retreat, but insisted that it not be solely a retreat for priests. He asked that it be open to all people: rich and poor, young and old, married and single. He wanted a variety of abilities present. Jean Vanier believed in creating *a community in retreat* by inviting people to share from their hearts. And so, Faith and Sharing was born.

For more information, search "Faith and Sharing" and "L'Arche" and Jean Vanier.

12 *The Three Questions* by Jon J. Muth. Scholastic Press. 2002. *Inside dust cover*.

13 Ibid. *At the very end*.

14 "The Anawim?" By Lee Ellis: leeellils.com/Anawime.html

15 *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses For Our Time*. Robert Ellsberg. Crossroad, NY. 2004. Page 519. Ellsberg took a five-year break during his undergraduate studies at Harvard College to volunteer at the Catholic Worker House in New York City.

16 *My Life with the Saints*. James Martin, SJ. Loyola Press, Chicago. 2006. Page 215.

17 "The Catholic Worker," May 1952.

18 Theopolitical Imagination: Discovering the Liturgy as a Political Act in an Age of Global Consumerism. William Cavanaugh. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark. 2002.

19 Kids Talk About Heaven. Eric Marshall. Crown Publishers, NY. 2003. Page 86.

20 The Bully, The Bullied, and The Bystander. Barbara Coloroso. Harper Collins/Quill, NY. 2003.

21 Using an Internet search, look for “UN Convention Rights of the Child in Child Friendly Language” in pdf format. Colorful poster.

22 Search: unicef.org/drc/ → The human rights framework (*left margin*) → Convention (pdf) and Universal Declaration of Human Rights (pdf) *in right margin*.

23 The Duty of Delight. Robert Ellsberg. Marquette University Press. 2008. January 1, 1954.

Activities and Resources

1. The Heart of the Gospel by Richard McBrien (8/94, UB & NCR)
2. Good Shepherd Puppets *K thru Grade Four*
3. Mother Teresa (1910–1997): a belated word of encouragement. *All ages*
4. How Often Do I Gotta Forgive? A round about forgiveness. (Matthew 18,21-22) *All*
5. The Prodigal Rap – Somewhat according to Luke 15 *All ages*
6. UN Convention on the Rights of the Child *Middle School*
7. Old Turtle, a story by Douglas Wood *All ages*
8. The Sower and the Seed, a story and mime *All ages*
9. All God’s Critters, a sing along by *Bill Staines* *K thru Grade Four*
10. A Round about Peace *All*
11. Creating a Church of Tomorrow *Older students and adults*

The Heart of the Gospel by Richard McBrien

1. The call to love one another.

Jesus said that our love for one another is the sign by which others will know that we are his disciples. (John 13,34-35)

2. The call to love even our enemies.

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. . . . If you love those who love you,” Jesus said, “what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. (Luke 6,27 and 32)

3. The call to forgive one another.

Jesus said that we cannot ask forgiveness for our own sins unless we are also ready to forgive those who sin against us. (Matthew 6,12)

4. The call always to seek reconciliation with one another.

Jesus said that we should not presume to offer sacrifice to God unless and until we have been reconciled with our brother or sister. (Matthew 5,23-24)

5. The call to renounce revenge.

“If anyone strikes you on the cheek,” Jesus said, “offer the other also.” (Luke 6,29)

6. The call to avoid judging and condemning others.

“Do not judge,” Jesus said, “and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. . . . First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye.” (Luke 6,37 and 42)

7. The call to avoid self-righteousness, presumption, and resentment toward others.

Jesus repudiated the proud Pharisee (Luke 18,10-14) and the resentful elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son (15,25-30). He condemned those who try to shut the doors of the reign of God so that others could not enter it (23,13) and said the publicans and prostitutes would enter the reign before their detractors would. (21,31-32)

8. The call to befriend those whom society looks down upon.

Jesus made himself the friend of outcasts (Matthew 11,19) and did not avoid their company. (Mark 2,16)

9. The call to serve one another, humbly and unselfishly.

Jesus gave us an example when he washed the feet of his disciples (John 13,4-15; see also Luke 22,27). “But when you give a banquet,” he said, “invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” (Luke 14,13-14)

10. The call to serve the poor.

Jesus singled out the poor in the Beatitudes, insisting that the reign of God will be theirs (Luke 6,20), as did Mary in her Magnificat, “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and

lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” (1,52-53) Jesus' parable of Lazarus and the rich man (16,19-31) is particularly compelling. Indeed, Pope John Paul II frequently cites it in summoning the church to the service of the poor and the powerless.

11. The corresponding call to beware of riches and the attachment to possessions.

Jesus said it would be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter into the reign of God. (Mark 10,25) He said that those who would be his disciples should be ready to sell all that they have and give to the poor. (10,21)

12. The call always to be just in our dealing with others.

Jesus attacked the Scribes and Pharisees for straining at gnats and swallowing camels for neglecting the weightier matters of the law, including justice first. (Matthew 23,23)

Good Shepherd Puppets *K thru Grade Four*

All you will need is a blanket, a cane or shepherd's crook, and a pile of white cotton socks.

Introduce the presentation to the kids with a question or two such as: "Who has ever heard us talk about Jesus as a Good Shepherd?" Or, "What are some of the things that a shepherd is expected to do?" Now we get our volunteers.

Since it is in second grade that students are typically prepared for their First Communion, I sometimes ask them to be the pool from which volunteers will come. Two older students (or parents) can be selected to hold up the curtain (blanket). Do this first. Ask the two volunteers to hold the blanket folded longwise so that the panel is long enough to reach the floor and tall enough to hide a second-grade sized puppeteer. It can be raised or lowered once everyone is in place.

Have the bag or box of clean white socks behind the screen. If they are the variety that has a fuzzy or tufted inside layer, pull them inside out for effect. As the storyteller, make sure there are three or four tucked in your back pocket or easily accessible. You will need them soon.

Produce one of the socks and ask the students what they see? After they tell you that you are holding a sock, slip it slowly over your hand and ask them again what they see. "A puppet!" Right. Now tell all the second-graders that they will be the puppeteers, if they wish, and that when they are instructed to do so, this is what you want them to do.

1. Stand in their place and, one row at a time, walk behind the "curtain," remove a sock from the box, move to the space just behind the "curtain," and then quietly slip the sock over their hand. They must remain silent; these sheep puppets are the quiet variety.

2. Once you get them started, select one of the students to be your "lost" sheep. A sock with a design or even a white cotton glove instead of a sock will help you keep track of that one.

3. Once everyone is in place, ask them to pay very close attention to the story and they will know exactly what to do.

The story begins . . . (make sure the cane or crook is in hand)

The Story of the Good Shepherd and the Lost Sheep, somewhat according to Luke, with a little bit of John.

Once upon a time there was a Good Shepherd (*Raise the crook or cane.*), a tall and skinny Shepherd (*Twist it so curved part turns left and right a couple times.*), and this Shepherd loved his sheep. Every day he would go into the fields and call the sheep: "Come sheep. Come." Here they come. And they would come. (*Probably no need to turn and prompt the volunteers. Puppeteers get the idea and begin to raise their hands, and the sheep appear over the top of the curtain.*) There they are.

During the day, the Shepherd would say: “Look sheep, over here, tall grass.” And the sheep would lean this way. (*And indeed all the socks lean the way the crook is leaning.*) And the Shepherd would say: “And over there, fresh water.” And the sheep would lean that way. (*And so they would.*) Tall grass. (*Lean this way.*) Fresh water. (*Lean that.*) Tall grass; fresh water. They were sometimes known as dancing sheep.

One day while the Good Shepherd was singing to the sheep and telling them stories, one of the sheep saw some more tall grass off in the distance and he/she wandered off. (*Tap the chosen “lost sheep” on the shoulder.*) Far away the sheep wandered. (*Nudge him/her if need be to get them on their way.*) Far away. (*After a moment, the storyteller gets more direct!*) **Get lost!!**

A little later, the Good Shepherd counted the sheep and realized one was missing. He said to those remaining: “You stay here. I’ll be right back.” And he set out looking for the lost sheep. He looked high, and low, high, and low. (*Raising and lowering cane as you go looking.*) Until finally, he found the lost sheep. He scooped him up (*Using the cane upside down, hook the lost sheep under the arm and return to the flock.*) and brought him back to the flock.

And when the lost sheep was returned, the others were so excited, they jumped for joy. (*At this point, remove the three or four socks from your pocket and toss them into the air, quietly inviting the rest of the sheep to toss their socks into the air as well. Let this go on for a moment. It is spontaneous and great fun.*) There was more excitement over the one that was lost coming home than the fact that all the others were there all afternoon. The story of the Good Shepherd and the Lost Sheep.

(*Ask the curtain to “step aside” so all the puppeteers can receive applause. Invite all your puppeteers to take a bow, and toss the socks back into the bag or box on their way back to their places.*)

Afterward:

When everyone is back in place, canvas the crowd for their reactions:

What was your favorite part of the puppet presentation? Answers will vary: when the sheep got lost, when the shepherd looked for the sheep, when the shepherd said “get lost,” or when the shepherd scooped up the lost sheep. But several are likely say that the “jumping for joy” part was their favorite. It is the part during which the sheep “threw up”! Yes, and perhaps that is a telling response.

It is a given that we can always count on the Good Shepherd. No one will doubt that the Shepherd is Good because He will not rest until all those who wandered off have been found and returned. That is our conviction. That is our belief.

But perhaps the level of excitement at the end of this presentation tells us that an equally important part is the “homecoming,” that part of the story in which the rest of the flock manifests

their delight at the return of the lost sheep. This literal jumping for joy manifests several things at once:

- The lost sheep was missed.
- It is better now that he has been returned.
- It is good to express our joy.

For this to be the case, it is safe to assume several more things:

- Before the lost sheep wandered off, he was a *member* of the flock, an equal.
- When the sheep left, he may have gotten lost, but his place in the flock was not.
- When he was returned by the Shepherd, his *saved* place was waiting for him.
- If the homecoming is convincing, the “returned” sheep will think twice about leaving again. The rest of the flock should make it clear that they want him to stay put this time.

While it is sometimes up to the Shepherd to hunt down and bring back the strays, it is the duty of the “remnant” to maintain their regard for them, save their places, and do their best to celebrate the homecoming so that the one that was lost and is now found will never considering leaving again. That is a tall order, but it is the best way to demonstrate to someone that they are highly regarded and cherished.

Consider the situation of students who have been on probation or in school detention due to their bullying behaviors. After a week or two of having to “sit on the sidelines,” they are now welcomed back to full participation in school activities. They could be quietly slipped back into the routine, or they could be welcomed back with “21 sock salute.” No one is dismissing what they did and no one is condoning their actions. But a little celebration might be just what is needed to get over the re-entry bump in the road that often accompanies such events.

This gospel story would be a great starting point for a faculty that is sorting out the merits of “restorative justice” and how the community intends to deal with someone who “left the flock” and now wants back in.

Where else would letting someone “back in” be a welcome gesture?

1. When the teacher asks us to form groups of four or five students, we tend to look to our friends first. There may be some who are often the last to be included. After this happens a few times, they may even begin to feel less worthy or that there is something wrong with them. How do we break out of this pattern?
2. We have all had the experience in the grocery store or movie ticket line when the person in front of us frantically begs us to save our place while they run for a forgotten item or to get money from the ATM on the other side of the lobby. How difficult is that? Are we willing?
3. Parents who are inching their way through traffic always have the option of letting someone into their lane or allowing someone to exit a parking lot by slipping in front them. In those

situations, many drivers look neither left nor right and are too determined to get home to even consider letting someone into their lane. Can we let in a car or two? (The good news is, that when we let someone in, everybody behind us *shares* in the good deed!)

4. Teachers have the option when the whole faculty gets together of sitting with different groups. They could take the lead by inviting others to sit with them or asking to be part of a group they have not sat with recently.

Mother Teresa (1910–1997): a belated word of encouragement. *All ages*

Mother Teresa became a world-renowned figure during the last decades of her life. She is often quoted and typically lifted up as an example of humble service, opting for the poor, and living simply.

The following is a short reflection that was reputedly found on the bulletin board of Mother Teresa after her death. These are words that inspired the woman who in turn inspired us. It consists of several bold recommendations. It is counter-cultural in its spirit, much like bullying prevention flies in the face of an increasingly violent culture.

If students find these words engaging, they may want to organize an art project that celebrates individual phrases. The word “anyway” could be a rallying point, a word that immediately recalls the example of this saintly woman and reminds a resolved group of students to do what needs to be done. This is a piece that would most likely land in a good place at the end of a long day or when support for “We First” is not as wide-spread as it needs to be.

“Do It Anyway”

People are often unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered;
Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives;
Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true enemies;
Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you;
Be honest and frank anyway.

What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight;
Build anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, they may be jealous;
Be happy anyway.

The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow;
Do good anyway.

Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough;
Give the world the best you've got anyway.

You see, in the final analysis, it is between you and God;
It was never between you and them anyway.

From Do It Anyway: The Handbook for Finding Personal Meaning and Deep Happiness in a Crazy World by Kent M. Keith. Inner Ocean Publishing, Inc. Maui, HI. 2003. This reflection was originally written by the author while at Harvard in the 1960's.

Reflections:

1. We have all heard the phrase "I will, if you will." Those words have probably gotten all of us in trouble at one time or another. But "Anyway" asks for more. It calls for a stronger resolve, such as: "I will, even if you don't."

Whom do you know that lives by this stronger statement already?

What is it like to watch them in action? Does their witness inspire others, prompt witnesses to step back, or both?

2. "In the final analysis . . ." Do these words suggest it is easier for someone who have lived a long life already would be more likely to take "Anyway" seriously?

What would sixty or seventy years of life bring to the discussion that would make them consider these words wise and reasonable?

3. "It's between you and God." If you are intent on doing the minimum, "Do It Anyway" may be an intriguing cluster of encouraging words, but it will not be something that becomes your standard. This inspirational piece asks for more than the minimum. It asks for all you've got.

What draws the most you have to give these days?

Is there anyone or anything or any cause that gets you to bring to the table your undivided attention and all your available resources? What are they?

Why is there no minimum when this/these are at risk?

How Often Do I Gotta Forgive? A round about forgiveness. (Matthew 18,21-22)

This little round was written to the tune of that old camp favorite “One Bottle of Pop.” We consider this a good way to remember Jesus’ mathematical formula for forgiveness.

Part I

How often do I gotta forgive, gotta forgive, gotta forgive?
How often do I gotta forgive when I’ve been wronged?

Part II

10 times 7, 20 times 7, 30 times 7, 40 times 7, 50 times 7, 60 times 7, 70 times 7.

Part III

Even if it is a pain, is a pain, is a pain,
Even if it is a pain in the patoot.

Barbara Ballenger © 1998

Music found at: www.musiclegacy.com/MIDI/OneBottlePop.MID

Directions:

Part I of this round is sung to the melody of verse two in “One Bottle of Pop.” We sing that one twice before bringing in Part II, the math. Part II is sung to the melody of verse one in the old “Pop” round. After two visits, we bring in Part III in a whiny tone.

Like any good round, it’s more about timing than volume. So encourage participants to keep both ears open to keep in time with the other two parts.

Before the whole thing begins to wear the participants down, let Part I know that they have just two more rounds until they’re done. Then shut down Part II, and finally Part III. Sometimes it is fun to bring everyone in on the final verse so we all end up on our “patoot”!!

Follow-up:

The words to this round can be found in Matthew 18, verses 21 and 22. It is prefaced with the story of the lost sheep and followed by the king who decided to settle accounts with his servants. In both instances, mercy reigns. Both the shepherd and the king exemplify compassion and expect the rest of the “sheep” and the forgiven servants to go and do the same.

In Matthew 18,23-35, the servant who was forgiven a huge debt should have shown the same mercy toward the poor soul who owed him a small sum. Likewise we, who have undoubtedly been granted a reprieve at a difficult time should be ready and willing to do the same whenever

the occasion presents itself. “Do unto others as has been done unto you” is how this good news reversal should read.

Peter’s plea in verse 21 almost sounds as if he is willing to go way beyond what is reasonable when expected to forgive a brother. One verse later Jesus removes all limits as quickly as he removes all doubts about the boundlessness of God’s mercy. Seventy times seven paints the picture of forgiveness as perfect and complete. There is no limit to God’s mercy. We should think twice about putting a cap on ours.

Some question:

1. The disciples asking how often they would have to forgive suggests that they, and we, like to know if there is a minimum. We always want to know if we can say “enough” and do so with impunity. So, let’s ask the kids. “Jesus says we have to forgive, and forgive, and forgive again. Is there a time when you would ever say: ‘Last time!’”? After some discussion, ask them if they could imagine Jesus ever saying the same thing.
2. “Even if it is a pain” says that it is hard to forgive. Is that true? Is it hard to forgive others?
3. Is forgiveness earned, or is it a gift? Does God forgive us because we have changed our hearts and shown that we have changed our ways? Or does God’s forgiveness come *first*, then God’s *grace*, and that makes it possible for us to *change* our ways? Once we better understand God’s ways, maybe we can rearrange ours!



One Bottle of Pop

1. 1 bottle of pop, 2 bottles of pop, 3 bottles... 4... 5...
6... 7 bottles of pop, POP!
2. Don't chuck your muck in our dustbin (3x)
[Amer. version: Don't throw your trash in my backyard]
Don't chuck your muck in our dustbin, our dustbin's full
3. Fish & chips & vinegar, vinegar, vinegar
Fish & chips & vinegar, pepper (3x) POP!

The Prodigal Rap – Somewhat according to Luke 15

All ages

Sometimes gospel stories that sound familiar don't get the attention they deserve. So if the *telling* can be ramped up a little, greater attentiveness might follow.

The students can be taught the chorus very quickly. We will want them to repeat it twice at the start and twice after every two verses.

To help them keep time and have a little fun besides, the leader can invite them to offer a little “punctuation” at the end of the second line. Tell them to be ready to cock their elbows back slightly at the end of the second line and let go with a little “Ugh!” for effect. Let them practice just once, without the words of the chorus, just so everyone is on the same page. If they are in church, sitting in pews, I'd switch the motion to “two hands in the air” or anything else that would keep them from ramming their elbows into the backs of the pews. Too much noise and the potential for personal injury is high!

The leader should practice ahead of time to get a sense of the rhythm. Then go for it.

Chorus:

**Open your eyes; it suits you well to be wise.
You don't know what you got till it's gone! (Ugh!) 2X**

The father of two, he didn't know what to do.
The younger one approached him and said:
"You love me, it's true! You know that money I'm due?
Cough it up before you are dead!"

With a tear in his eye and a heart askin' why,
The papa handed over the dough.
After two days went by the boy he walked out of sight,
Believin' he had someplace to go.

Open your eyes; it suits you well to be wise.
You don't know what you got till it's gone! (Ugh!) 2X

He walked down the road till he put down his load.
It was party time wherever he go.
"You my friend," he was told while the money, it flowed,
But it ended when the boy became po'.

Lost in his pride now he had to decide
What a runaway had oughta do.
A job was supplied, he fed pigs on the side.
He's a farmer now through and through.

Open your eyes; it suits you well to be wise.

You don't know what you got till it's gone! (Ugh!) 2X

In the midst of the stink he had started to think
Of his papa he left standin' in the do'.
So before he could sink in the stuff the pigs drink
He arose and he looked back no mo'.

He intended to say in a sorrowful way
He had wronged and he wanted to right!
He would ask for some pay if he worked every day.
He was planning as he came into sight.

Open your eyes; it suits you well to be wise.
You don't know what you got till it's gone! (Ugh!) 2X

His papa he ran till they met hand in hand.
They embraced and were glad for the day.
The welcome was grand as they struck up the band.
The traveler had come home to stay.

From the field he could hear all the party and cheer,
Now the older son he wanted know:
Why his calf disappeared. He thought this quite weird.
These things had never happened befo'.

Open your eyes; it suits you well to be wise.
You don't know what you got till it's gone! (Ugh!) 2X

With the servant unable to lure him to table,
The papa came a pleading outside.
And that's where the fable winds up so unstable.
We don't know what the son will decide!

But the boy was returned from the death he had spurned;
He was lost, yah, and now he is found.
So we hope you have learned that mercy ain't earned.
It's a gift. It's meant to abound.

Open your eyes; it suits you well to be wise.
You don't know what you got till it's gone! (Ugh!) 2X

Afterward

This “rap” version of the Gospel will likely bring some enthusiasm to the mix. That’s just the kind of spirit we would expect at a homecoming. There is nothing in this story about having to

account for the inheritance misspent or the time away. It is all about coming home and the party that was waiting. It is about a pending invitation for the older boy to come and join in the celebration. The excitement the children feel after this story can be used as leverage for the older brother to jump in. Why wouldn't he want to attend a party in his own house? Wouldn't we?

Regardless of the age of the students, this Gospel and rap are ready references for how to welcome back the bully. The prodigal father is more concerned about the boy feeling at home than he is about what went on elsewhere. The father is ready to forgive all. Are we?

If the students have time to discuss "their part" in the story, spend time with the chorus:

Discussion:

Open your eyes; it suits you well to be wise.
You don't know what you got till it's gone!

1. Were any eyes opened during this story? Whose? What did they see?
2. If "open eyes" are another way of saying "experience," what did the younger son learn on his journey? When he returned home? When he was reacquainted with his older brother?
3. What do we rely on wisdom for? Where is the wisdom in this story? How wise was the younger son after his return home compared to when he decided to leave?
4. Talk about the wisdom of the father. His neighbors may have counted his actions and his excitement about his son's return to be foolishness. Which was it: wisdom or foolishness?
5. "You don't know what you've got till it's gone." Is this a riddle? How can you know something only after it is gone? If what was gone is returned, do you think you would have a new appreciation for it?

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Middle School

The Convention on the Rights of the Child was carefully drafted over the course of 10 years (1979-1989) with the input of representatives from all societies, all religions and all cultures. A working group made up of members of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, independent experts and observer delegations of non-member governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and UN agencies was charged with the drafting. NGOs involved in the drafting represented a range of issues – from various legal perspectives to concerns about the protection of the family.

The Convention reflects this global consensus and, in a very short period of time, it has become the most widely accepted human rights treaty ever. It has been ratified by 192 countries. Only two countries have not ratified: The United States and Somalia, which have signaled their intention to ratify by formally signing the Convention. .

Like all human rights treaties, the Convention on the Rights of the Child had first to be approved, or adopted, by the United Nations General Assembly. On 20 November 1989, the governments represented at the General Assembly agreed to adopt the Convention into international law.

When a government signed the Convention, it had to widely consult within the country on the standards in the Convention and begin identifying the national laws and practices that needed to be brought into conformity with these standards. Ratification was the next step, which formally bound the government on behalf of all people in the country to meet the obligations and responsibilities outlined in the Convention.

Children have a right to:

Survival

1. Water
2. Food
3. Have a home
4. Health care

Development

5. Education
6. Play

Protection

7. Love and care – to be with family
8. Be protected from work that could harm or exploit them
9. Participate fully in life regardless of their disability
10. Protection from the fighting and destruction of war

Participation

11. An identity, including a name, nationality, and a religion

12. Freedom of expression
13. A good life, lived to its potential

Using an Internet search, look for “UN Convention Rights of the Child in Child Friendly Language” in pdf format. It is a colorful poster that would look good on a bulletin board.

Old Turtle, Scholastic Press, New York. 1992. *Sadly, the book is currently out-of-print, but copies are available online. No legitimate school library should be without a copy or two.*

It is not often that one particular story can touch so many important issues as gracefully and creatively as Old Turtle. Douglas Wood manages to thread the connection between all things, living and inanimate (or so we thought), with the stringy sinews of an argument. It begins quietly, but soon engulfs everything that is. Everything comes to an abrupt halt when the oldest and the wisest bellows the very word that is used most often to curtail bullying: STOP! It is Old Turtle's remedy to a good thing gone bad.

She begins to put things back together, to the degree that she is able, but ultimately has to rely on the insight of all those who were so nearsighted just a moments earlier to make the fix permanent. While Old Turtle has the world's attention, she alerts everything to the fact that people will be coming soon:

“There will soon be a new family of beings in the world,” she said,
“and they will be strange and wonderful. They will be reminders of all that God is.”

This is reminiscent of the Genesis passages (1,27) that stated male and female were created in God's own image.

“They will possess many powers. They will be strong, yet tender,
a message of love from God to the earth, and a prayer from the earth back to God.”

“And the people came. But the people forgot.” No sooner had they arrived than they forgot they were reminders, messages, and prayers. It may have been too much to remember. But it turned out it was way too much to forget. Death ensued:

“Because the people could not remember who they were, or where God was.”

They were lost. They had lost all sense of value and direction. And they were bent on a path of self-destruction, until the rest of creation began to speak up, the way Old Turtle had.

“And after a long, lonesome and scary time . . . the people listened,
and began to hear . . . and to see God in one another . . . and in the beauty of all the Earth.

Finally, there is hope. “And Old Turtle smiled. And so did God.”

This creation story is not found in Genesis, so it cannot be said that Old Turtle is “inspired.” But it most certainly is an inspiring book that deserves to still be “in print.” It is a story that bores to the core of what it means to be human, to be “of God,” a part of creation, able to listen and see, and remember what we may have forgotten. It is a hope-filled story because it suggests that there is present in creation a voice that can remind us of the God within us when we are able to recognize the God in others.

The implications and applications of Old Turtle for bullying prevention are abundant. Below are just a few of the possible discussion and activities that can draw from the richness of this story. Take these and run!

After you have read or heard the story, pick and choose from the following discussion possibilities.

1. As the story opens, we read:

Once, long long ago . . .
yet somehow, not so very long . . .
when all the animals
 and rocks
 and winds and water
 and trees
 and birds
 and fish
 and all the beings of the world could speak . . .
 and understand one another . . .

What do you think Douglas Wood was thinking when he said: “all the beings of the world could speak and understand one another”? How can that be? Is he suggesting that everyone should be able to communicate with everyone else, somehow?

2. Of all the images of God at the beginning of the story (a wind, great rock, a twinkling and a shining), which do you like the best? Why? Can you plan an art project so your classroom can fill a bulletin board in school with the many images of God?

3. Douglas Wood says in his story that Old Turtle “certainly never argued about God.” Have you ever heard arguments about God? What were they like? How did they end up? How much do we know about God that we can argue about to begin with?!

4. What did Old Turtle’s perspective bring to the “argument”? What did her careful choice of words accomplish? Do you think that arguments sometimes arise because we do not listen carefully to others or take the time to see their point of view?

5. Old Turtle describes people in a variety ways, all very poetic. Do you have a favorite?

6. The story suggests that people “hurt one another” and they “hurt the earth . . . because they could not remember who they were, or where God was.” What’s the connection between hurting and not remembering? If you have ever witnessed an incident of bullying, physical or otherwise, do you think it is possible that the bully was not remembering something important? Is it possible that the bully was hurting too?

7. At the end of the story, why do you suppose the author suggested that there was a “long, and lonesome, and scary time” between the creation speaking up and the people hearing and seeing God? Why was it long? Lonesome? Scary?

8. Can you imagine more wise sayings that Old Turtle may have said at other times? Could you imagine posting a “Word for the Week” from Old Turtle? A section of the classroom bulletin board could be reserved for a picture of this wise old reptile and each week she could offer a few inspiring words to live by.

9. Many simple books on origami include an example of a turtle. Perhaps the class could practice their folding skills and construct mobiles to be hung from the ceiling. Multi-colored turtles keeping their “balance” could be a subtle reminder for everyone to do what they can to keep things balanced in their school. If folding is too much of a challenge for lower grades, they can color some two dimensional pictures of turtles and some volunteer moms or dads can help display them in carefully constructed mobiles.

10. A local nature preserve would probably be delighted to have a troop of volunteers to reconstruct paths, remove invasive species, or pick up litter during carefully scheduled visits. These field trips would give students an opportunity to “hear God” and “see God in the beauty of all the Earth.” The visit will give rise to some reflection, creative writing of prayers about creation.

The Sower and the Seed *All ages*

Goal: Announce the good news that none of our efforts are wasted. In the end, all of our attempts at enhancing the learning environment of the school, even those that appear to have failed, will combine to be a good foundation for all future endeavors.

Objectives:

1. Demonstrate that every member of a school community contributes to the well being of the whole.
2. The desire to build community destines every effort to be of some benefit, at the time of the effort, or down the road.
3. Over time, and by the grace of God, successes *and* failures can combine to provide a healthy and nurturing environment for learning.

Action:

1. A storyteller and any number of volunteers can “act out” as the story unfolds.
2. There is room for creativity, light-hearted innovation, and abundance from a hope-filled gospel story.

The Story of the Sower and the Seed, somewhat according to Luke, or Matthew, or Mark for that matter. . . . (Matthew 13, Mark 4, Luke 8)

A reader/storyteller can proclaim the gospel while a number of volunteers become the seeds. It would help if one mime or actor could be familiar with the story to encourage the other volunteers to be “lively” seeds. As the teller mentions seeds that “whirled and twirled,” the volunteers can let their arms flail about as they spin in search of a landing spot. Their feet, of course, are the roots and their arms are the shoots. To “die” is simply to go limp. Play with it.

A Sower went out to sow some seed.
And as the Sower cast the seed to the wind,
it whirled and twirled in the air and some landed on the footpath,
Where it was eaten by the birds of the air (*flapping hands pecking on heads*)
And trampled under foot, no less.

The Sower went out to sow some more seed
And it whirled and twirled in the air and landed on rocky soil.
And the roots went down, as far as they could go,
And the shoots shot up, as far as they could go.
But there were too many rocks in the place
And not enough room to grow and (*trying to push rocks away with great effort*)
Soon the tiny plants withered,
And they died.

The Sower went out to sow more seed
And it whirled and twirled in the air and landed among the weeds.

And the roots went down, as far as they could go,
And the shoots shot up, as far as they could go.
But the weeds grew up as well
And soon they choked the little plants (*choking is easy to portray*)
And so they withered
And they died.

The Sower went out to sow even more seed
And it whirled and twirled in the air and landed on shallow soil.
And the roots went down, as far as they could go,
And the shoots shot up, as far as they could go.
But soon the sun came up
And it beat down on the tiny plants
And they grew very thirsty (*tongues hanging out*)
And before long they withered for lack of water
And they died.

The Sower went out to sow more seed
And it whirled and twirled in the air and landed on shallow soil.
And the roots went down, as far as they could go,
And the shoots shot up, as far as they could go.
But the sun came out again
And the plants tried to run away
But their roots were in the ground and they couldn't get away
And so they withered for lack of moisture
And this time they really died.

Again, the Sower went out to sow some seed
And it whirled and twirled in the air and landed on shallow soil.
And the roots went down,
And the shoots shot up,
And it grew very hot, the plant got very thirsty, and it died.

Again, and again: (*faster each time*)
 Roots,
 Shoots,
 Wither,
 Died. (5x)

And then, it RAINED.
And soon the great pile of dead things became. . . .
 COMPOST !! (*hands and fingers moving to indicate worms wiggling*)

The next time the Sower went out to sow some seed
It whirled and twirled in the air and landed on the compost.
And the roots went down, . . down, . . . down into the deep rich soil

And the shoots shot up, . . . up . . . , up toward the sun.
And the plant provided a rich harvest of 30, 60, and 100-fold. (*healthy plants*)

Let those who have ears to hear, LISTEN.
The story of the Sower, and the Seed.

Follow-up:

1. (*A question for the volunteers.*) What was it like to be one of those seeds? Could you tell the difference in the various soils?
2. The Sower was the same throughout the story. The seed chosen each time was the same. What was different each time the Sower went out to sow some seed? *The soil, i.e., where the seed fell.*
3. What role does the soil play in the gospel story? *It gives the Word a place to grow.*
4. Does the quality of soil make a difference? *Yes. In most instances, the tiny plants did not survive. Conditions were not right.*
5. If the Sower is God and the seed is God's Word, what does the soil stand for? *That's us!*
6. If we, then, are the soil, let's talk about how the quality and preparation of the soil has a bearing on the success of the plant. *What does it mean to be open to receiving the Word of God?*

Failure:

1. Many plants failed to survive in this story. Why? *There was not sufficient life in the soil to sustain the growing plant. Or there was not sufficient soil to hold water or allow room for roots to grow and develop.*
2. The dead plants were saved and composted. Over time, they became new soil, the next place the seed was to be planted. How can failure make way for future success?
We can learn from our mistakes.
We can learn what gifts we have, and what we must rely upon others to provide.
We can also learn that we must enrich our soil to be more receptive to God's Word.
3. Is there hope to be found in this story? Where do you find it?

Thirty, sixty, and one hundred-fold:

1. We can tell when a plant is rooted in rich soil. The plant thrives, grows strong, and resists disease and pests. Since we are the soil, what can we do to "enrich" ourselves to prepare for the coming of the Word (seed)?

Listen to and study the Word of God.

Look for and find the truth therein.

Understand what it means to live in the reign of God, as sisters and brothers to all, looking after the needs of others, sharing our resources.

2. When we work the soil in a garden plot, we move soils around and mix them up with other organic matter. There is lots of “mixing up” in the course of a school day as well. Can we enrich each other by our example, encouraging words, and enthusiasm?

We can learn especially from those who are from different cultures or neighborhoods.

Different personalities can liven the mix of our small groups.

People who have learned from past mistakes can bring experience to our groups.

3. Harvest time is an exciting time. We get to collect the fruits of our labor. It would be a good practice to pause occasionally during the school year to take account of our progress.

a. Have we witnessed more positive behaviors on the playground or in the cafeteria?

b. Have we noticed a difference in the attitudes of those we have tried harder to include in our activities?

c. Have other students been more willing to volunteer because we have made an effort to do so?

d. Have we tried to apply any of the lessons learned in our religion classes this year?

e. Do we notice the difference in others when we try to be more grateful, more complimentary, and kinder in our speech and behavior?

Related activities:

1. Start a compost pile near a planted area of the school grounds. Resources to get started are too numerous to mention or list here. But a simple beginning can be found online at:

sustainable.tamu.edu/slidesets/kidscompost/kid5.html, *or*

www.plowhearth.com/magazine/compost_how_to.asp

2. Get a student or teacher to volunteer to bring a bucket of compost (the finished product) to the school to be examined and admired by the students. Compare the ingredients of this bucket with a shovel full of dirt from a “footpath” in the play area.

Can the students tell what any of the original ingredients might have been?

Is there life in the bucket? Is anything moving?

Compare it with the soil from the footpath. Is there a difference between soil and dirt?

Which is more likely to sustain new plant life?

3. Experiment by planting seeds from the same packet in various kinds of soil: sand, small stones, footpath dirt, humus or potting soil, rich composted soil. Provide each container with the same amount of light and water. Make a chart so you can record the difference in plant growth, appearance, hardiness, etc.

A song that can be easily taught, *a cappella*, and enjoyed by the young at heart. I teach children the chorus and let them know that they will need to provide an animal sound at the end of each verse. The chorus comes easily and they can hardly wait till they get to make the animal sounds.

When I tell them about the animal sounds they need to make at the end of verse one, I make as if I will have to teach them the sound of a cow. Of course they volunteer the sound right away. They are just as willing when I ask for a coyote at the end of verse two. They are not quite as confident at the end of the next verse. There is quite a variety of offerings for a jaybird disagreeing. They are delighted when I tell them I happen to do "a very good jaybird disagreeing." With a little fanfare, I ruffle my feathers and blurt out: "Uh, nope, nope, nope. I don't think so."

I usually use only the first three verses, but the last two certainly leave open some wonderfully creative opportunities for kids to decide how porcupines can talk to themselves, etc.

Chorus:

All God's critters got a place in the choir
Some sing low, some sing higher
Some sing out loud on the telephone wire
And some just clap their hands, or paws
Or anything they got now.

Listen to the bass, it's the one on the bottom
Where the bullfrog croaks and the hippopotamus
Moans and groans with a big to-do
The old cow just goes MOOOOO

Chorus

The dog and the cat pick up the middle
While the honey bee hums and the cricket fiddles
The donkey brays and the pony neighs
The old coyote *howls*

Chorus

Listen to the top where the little birds sing
On the melody with the high note ringing
The hoot owl hollers over everything
The jaybird disagrees: *Uh, nope, nope, nope. I don't think so.*

Chorus

Singin' in the night-time, singin' in the day

Little duck quacks, and he's on his way
The possum ain't got much to say
And the porcupine talks to himself

Chorus

It's a simple song of livin' sung everywhere
By the ox and the fox and the grizzly bear
Grumpy alligator and the hawks above
Sly raccoon and the turtle dove.

Chorus

Afterward:

There are three questions for you:

Q: 1. Whose choir is it? A: *It's God's choir.*

Q: 2. If it's God's choir, who gets to decide who is *in* the choir? A: *God gets to decide.*

Q: 3. Okay, who is *in* the choir? A: *Everyone !!*

We will never meet anyone who is *not* in the choir. So we want to welcome everyone we meet and encourage them to join in the game, the class, or the adventure. It is, however, likely that we will meet some who do not *feel* like they are part of the choir. Perhaps they have never been invited before. Some may even have been told they are *not* invited or welcome. It is up to us to turn that around. We need to be encouraging and convincing.

1. What is the best way to encourage participation?
2. Can you remember a time when you were convinced it is okay to jump in?
3. Shall we invite those who have disrupted the "choir" or "walked away" to come back? Maybe they have been responsible for some of the bullying.

A Round about Peace

All

Rounds are fun. They are drama and rhythm and message all in one. Even though each group of participants has only one phrase to master and repeat, they are totally aware of the other two messages and they take in the entire ensemble as they endeavor to do their part successfully. After teaching each group their particular part, remind everyone that this is not a shouting match or a race. It is more like a dance that has to be done with the partners in mind and it's all about timing.

The words of this round are borrowed from Pope Paul VI and the classic Christian tune "Let There Be Peace on Earth."

This is a great opportunity to incorporate ASL signs (American Sign Language) for some of the words used in the round. You can go online to ASL Browser and find video clips of the key words below. The kids can do this easily. There is no need to do every word; just a couple for each line will be plenty.

Teach the round

Divide the assembly into three. Demonstrate how to do the sign as you teach the words. Signs and words help each other out.

Emphasize the beat. Number 1 is the downbeat; 2 is the less emphatic beat. Numbers *in parentheses* are silent beats, between the words. So in the first round, the word *justice* is two syllables in one beat; the 2 is the pause.

There are eight counts to the words for the first two groups. The third group comes in on the second beat and just keeps going. Number (1) is the silent beat for this one.

Let the groups practice their parts three times. Tell them you will let the first group begin with one repetition before bringing in group two. After the second group says "me" the second time, group three begins immediately with "peace."

Get started. After all three groups are going, the leader can hop around and join each group for a round or two making sure that the timing is right. Then back to group one signaling "one more time!" Stop them and move to group two signaling "one more time." With group three, I often start to bend my knees and gradually sink in front of the group and they get softer, and softer, and softer until it's done!

1st group: "Justice – will bring us – a last-ing peace."

1 – (2) 1 – (2) 1 – 2 – 1 (2)

Justice: The two 'F' hands (index finger and thumb touching with other fingers outstretched), palms facing each other, move up and down alternately to depict the movement of scales (Justice scales).

Peace: two hands alternately clasping each other, hand on top then left, and then hands separate and go to sides palms down.

2nd group: “Peace will abound if we spread it around; it begins – with – me.”
1 2 1 2 1 2 1 (2)

Spread: Hands brought together at chest, fingers of each hand together, then hands go down, away from each other, and fingers spread out.

Me: Index finger pointing to self.

3rd group: “Peace, peace, peace, peace, peace, . . .”
2 (1) 2 (1) 2 (1) 2 (1) 2 (1) (comes in on the off beat)

Build Your Own Prayer Service

Your school wants every student to feel safe in an environment that brings the best out of *everyone* in the building. Assemblies bring a sense of solidarity; class meetings focus on particular needs at regularly scheduled intervals. Teacher meetings facilitate interdepartmental communication and allow for strategizing to address individual student needs. PTA/PTU meetings unite the home front with teacher and student initiatives. But there are times when the most important thing is to stop everything and meet with God. Those meetings often begin with “Let us pray.”

Periodically, it is important to pause and refocus on our mission, remembering where it is we get the strength and the inspiration to look after each other. We invite the silence to soothe us and the Word of God to inform us. We breathe in the Spirit as we ask for courage, compassion, and the willingness to collaborate with other members of the Body. We take a moment’s retreat so our next steps forward can be purposeful and with effect.

Prayer is intimate and communal at the same time. We turn to God for personal needs and on others’ behalf at a moment’s notice. We come as we are, knowing next to nothing about a God who is revealed in everything we encounter. And yet we come.

While we may be inclined to cover our face in the presence of God, still we cannot overcome the urge to climb the mountain and enter the cloud in the hope that God will pass by. Our God is invisible and yet approachable – *the Lord, a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity.* (Exodus 34,6) So, of course, we come.

What makes us think that God will listen to our plea, from a lonely voice or an entire school assembled? Perhaps one of the reasons we pray is not only to hear from God, but to hear ourselves, hearts and voices united. When we pray, we have to find words, the right words, that reveal the hunger and yearnings within. We sometimes struggle to express accurately the needs of many and diverse individuals. But struggle we do. Prayer is a journey of many steps, but the initial steps are always required and the journey is never ended until the final steps are trod.

And there will be some resting along the way. The plow horse needs a moment now and then, and in that brief respite, the farmer can hear the birds, and test the soil with his fingers, and dream of a harvest weeks away. The rest will be for listening, and hoping, and trusting in the God who is resting with us. Prayer takes time. All important things take time.

In anticipation of this bullying prevention program, principals from the Cleveland diocesan elementary schools requested prayer services they could use with their students. But school’s needs are as diverse as their populations, so I offer here a smorgasbord of options from which students and teachers can draw prayers, scriptures, petitions, reflections, and blessings to build their own prayer service. Planners can use a favorite prayer to start a class meeting or add a gospel reading that leads to some personal reflection time. The components offered here can be combined in any number of ways to provide an experience that meets your needs and conforms to your time constraints.

As for the place of stories, poems, and other reflective pieces, they may not be “inspired” selections from the Bible, but their words are inspiring and they can challenge us in ways that are both contemporary and personal. Preachers often reach for examples such as these to engage various members of the congregation. The few offerings included here are only meant to prime the pump, encouraging teachers, students, and parents to suggest other nuggets of wisdom that challenge and encourage. After a while, one or the other selection may emerge as a favorite with words and phrases that unite the student body and encourage teachers as well.

Prayers

Follow the leader – This format works well with all ages, but is best suited for younger students who may not be able to read along or out loud. Everyone is instructed to repeat what the leader says. There is lots of room for movement, gestures, and voice inflection among these lines. Allow the Spirit to move. The leader simply invites everyone to pray, and after a moment, begins:

- I. Brother Jesus, *(all repeat each line)*
it's a great day
because we are together
and you are here with us.
Thanks for coming.
Help us
to look after one another,
all
day
long.
Bless us all.
Amen.
- II. Spirit of God, *(all repeat each line)*
come into our hearts,
right in here. *(leader points to heart)*
Help us to do
what needs to be done,
right here. *(leader opens hands pointing to classroom)*
Let there be peace
in our school
And let it begin
with me. *(leader points again to heart)*
Amen.
- III. Loving God, *(all repeat each line)*
We are all at school.
It is our home
away from home.
But it is good here.
We take care of each other
in the classroom,
at lunch,
during phys ed,
and during recess.

Don't worry,
 we are doing a good job.
Everyone
 is
 in
 good
 hands –
 our hands.
You showed us
 how that is done.
Thank you, loving God.
Bless us all.
Amen.

Other opening prayers

- I. Good Shepherd, you know your sheep. You love your sheep.
You hear our prayers, and you look after our needs.
 You are moved with pity and you heal us.
 You are concerned about our wellbeing, and you lead us to pasture.
 And when we stray, you search for us until we are found.
Give us the heart of a Good Shepherd.
Fill us with compassion, enough to keep us focused on the needs of others.
And like you, our Good Shepherd, help us to respond immediately
 when they are in trouble.
We pray in one voice, as members of the same flock.
Amen.
- II. What on Earth would we do without you?
You are Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier of everything and everyone we know.
You give us every breath.
You inspire our every thought.
You are present at the start of every day to greet us,
 and you invite us to rest in your protective embrace at day's end.
Help us to feel your presence now,
 in our hallways,
 between classes,
 when we play and when we are being tested.
Help us to see you clearly
 in the faces of all the students and teachers here.
Help us to hear your loving voice
 when our teachers speak and our friends call our name.
Help us to see your warm welcome
 as we include others in our groups and at our cafeteria table.

As you provide for us, help us to provide for each other.
You help us get it right.
What on Earth would we do without you?
We ask your blessing.
Amen.

More silence than words

- I. Be still, and know that God is here. *(pause)*
Be bathed in God's light, and feel God's presence. *(pause)*
Welcome God into your heart. Do not be afraid. *(pause)*
Accept God's forgiveness, God's mercy. *(pause)*
Be still, and know that God is here. *(pause)*
Is there anything that frightens you? Give that to God. *(pause)*
Is there pain from a recent loss, rejection, or put-down? Give that to God. *(pause)*
Is there failure or disappointment that troubles you? Give that to God. *(pause)*
Be still, and know that God is here. *(pause)*
Is there a friend who is having a hard time? Give that person to God. *(pause)*
Is there a relationship that is not going well right now? Give that concern to God.
(pause)
Is there never enough time or quiet to feel at peace? Be at peace with God now. *(pause)*
Be still, and know that God is here. *(pause)*
Be still, and know. *(pause)*
Be still. *(pause)*
- II. In Genesis, there is a story of how we came to be.
(pause and invite student to close their eyes)
It all started with . . . You. *(pause)*
You scraped together some earth. *(pause)*
You fashioned us. *(pause)*
This way, and that. *(pause)*
Then you breathed life into us. *(pause)*
You filled us with your Spirit. *(pause)*
Your breath is still *our* breath. *(pause)*
We can feel it. *(pause)*
In. *(pause)*
Out. *(pause)*
It is a fragile way to be connected to you. *(pause)*
But it makes all the difference in the world. Our world. *(pause)*
In. *(pause a little longer)*
Out. *(pause longer still)*
In. *(pause longer)*
And out. *(pause, repeat these last two words a few more times if you like.)*
Every day, this is how we come to be. *(pause)*

It is good for us to be here. (pause)
Each of us. (pause)
Amen. (pause for a while, then invite students to open their eyes again)

III. Waiting on the prodigal. *Based on the story in Luke 15.*

Prodigal God

You are “reckless”* when it comes to your love for us.
You are like the father who longs for the return of the younger son,
even before the son leaves the house.
You are the one who grieves his absence and worries over his wellbeing.
You are the one who scours the horizon, longing for the faintest sign of his return.
And you run to meet the one who barely had enough courage to come home.
You kiss him and embrace him and make him part of the family again.
You can’t even remember what he said in his rehearsed speech.
You just wanted him home, safe and sound.
You are too good to us.

Younger Son,

What were you thinking?
You were barely old enough to earn your keep and you asked for half the inheritance.
You might as well have asked for half of your father’s heart.
Whatever it was you did in that far off land, it wasn’t good enough to keep you there.
You prayed, and the answer to your prayer was simple: “Go home.”
Your father surprised you; he saved your place in the family, and in his broken heart.
Now you know how much you were loved in the first place.
What were you thinking?

Big brother,

What are you waiting for?
The party is well underway and you are making a show outside.
Of course your father loves you.
Stop paying attention to what has been restored to your little brother,
and see what has always been yours.
You are older, and you should be wiser now.
And you are no less loved.
This is your father’s party. It is a celebration of *his* abundant love.
It will *not* be the party *it could be* until you join it.
What are you waiting for?

Our school is like our prodigal God who wants us home, safe and sound.
It provides more than we can take advantage of.
And our school celebrates our presence
Before *and* after our lapse in good judgment.
Our school celebrates our presence more than we can imagine.

We are the younger *and* the older brother.
They could just as easily have been sisters.
We are not as mature as we will be someday, but in the meantime,
we have to do the best we can. No more. No less.

God help us, to be grateful members of this family.
God help us, to be as mindful of other family members
as we would like them to be considerate of us.
God help us to forgive when the need is there.
God help us to join in the celebration of others
especially when our joining in would make a difference.
God help us to do what we can, however we can, whenever it is possible,
by the grace of God.

Amen.

** the word "prodigal" can mean reckless and lavish*

IV. For teachers

The woman from Magdala called you "Rabboni."
It meant more than "teacher."
The name she chose revealed her deep affection for you
because of what you taught, not so much by telling as by showing –
by your willingness to sacrifice all for the sake of your message.
Brother Jesus, beloved teacher, "Rabboni,"
Help us to demonstrate to our students and to one another
that our teaching comes from our hearts, from our sense of mission,
because we are "called" to proclaim the gospel with our lives.
Help us to witness boldly,
confident that you will sustain us in our time of need,
encourage us when we are unsure,
and enthuse us with your unflagging Spirit.
As Mary of Magdala was the first to witness your Resurrection,
may others feel hope in our classroom
trust in our presence,
and solidarity in our mission to cherish every single student.
It feels good to know you are one of us.
Amen.

V. Thomas Merton Prayer:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to

please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. +++

From *Thoughts in Solitude* by Thomas Merton (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux)
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A Children's Prayer

Old students and adults

I stumbled on this reflection in a remarkable collection of prayers and reflective pieces in Living God's Justice noted below. It is a strong piece that juxtaposes the general well being of our nation's children with the utterly poor and at-risk children in many parts of the world. The contrast is stunning. Cleverly written, it deserves to be read by someone who can capture the irony and the pain. It also deserves to be followed by silence, and then some discussion. There may not be time to explore the causes of the conflict or the contrast during the prayer service. This may just be a time for compassion and feeling as connected as possible with children whose lives may be suffering from the impact our world is having on theirs.

A Children's Prayer

We pray for children who put chocolate fingers everywhere, who like to be tickled, who stomp in puddles and ruin their new pants, who sneak Popsicles before supper, who erase holes in math workbooks, who can never find their shoes.

And we pray for those who stare at photographers from behind barbed wire, who can't bound in the street in a new pair of sneakers, who never go to the circus, who live in an X-rated world.

We pray for children who bring us sticky kisses and fistfuls of dandelions, who sleep with the dog and bury the goldfish, who hug us in a hurry and forget their lunch money, who cover themselves with Band-Aids and sing off-key, who squeeze toothpaste all over the sink, who slurp their soup.

And we pray for those who never get dessert, who have no safe blanket to drag behind them, who watch their parents watch them die, who can't find any bread to steal, who don't have any rooms to clean up, whose pictures aren't on anybody's dresser, whose monsters are real.

We pray for children who spend all their allowances before Tuesday, who throw tantrums in the grocery store and pick at their food, who like ghost stories, who shove dirty clothes under the bed and never rinse the tub, who get visits from the tooth fairy, who don't like to be kissed in front of the car-pool, who squirm in church and scream in the phone, whose tears we sometimes laugh at, and whose smiles can make us cry.

We pray for children who want to be carried and for those we never give up on and for those who don't get a second chance. For those we smother . . . and for those who will grab the hand of anybody kind enough to offer it.

From Living God's Justice: reflections and prayers. The Roundtable Association of Diocesan Social Action Directors. St. Anthony Messenger Press. 2006. Originally found in *World Citizen News*, October 1992. Reprinted with permission of NWO Publications, 113 Church Street, Burlington VT. 05401.

Scriptures

Scriptures are an immediate touchstone with our ongoing dialogue with God. In light of our bullying prevention efforts, familiar and often referenced scriptures can take on a new perspective.

Biblegateway.com allows for keyword searches, passage lookup, and topic index searches. The scriptures are available in more than 30 other languages on the Bible Gateway web site. It is a quick and easy way to find scriptures when you can only remember key words. Also, you can review selections of scripture according to various translations. Depending on their audience and theme, a planning committee might use one translation or the other. For instance, the familiar reference to the first of the Beatitudes (Matthew 5,3) reads differently in the following English translations:

New International Version (NIV):

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

The Message (MSG):

"You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope.

With less of you there is more of God and his rule."

Contemporary English Version (CEV):

"God blesses those people who depend only on him.

They belong to the kingdom of heaven!"

Below are a few references from the Hebrew Scriptures and several from Christian gospels and letters. The brief notes under each reference could serve as focus or talking points. They are merely suggestions to help the prayer lead address bullying prevention themes in light of God's Word. Multiple references are noted for parallels or similar excerpts from other texts.

Hebrew Scriptures:

Leviticus 19,9-18 (The Golden Rule) Mark 12,28-34. Luke 10-25-28.

1. God asks harvesters to be mindful of the poor. Leave something for them!
2. After many other mandates, God says: "love your neighbor as yourself." (18)

Isaiah 6,3-8 (The Call of the Prophet Isaiah)

1. Isaiah considered himself unworthy. But what makes us all worthy is not our deeds, but the grace that God supplies.
2. "Whom shall I send?" asked the Lord. "Send me!" *We* must be willing to serve.

Ezekiel 37,1-14 (The Valley of the Dry Bones)

1. Can be used during inaugural efforts to establish a "We First" program in a school.
2. The dry bones are a stark testimony to the life that was once part of the school.
3. It takes more than the rattling of bones; life must be *breathed* into "the army."
4. God's own Spirit will come, and God will dwell in the midst of the school.

Jonah 3,1-10 (The Conversion of Nineveh)

1. After a life and death experience, the prophet walks to the center of “an enormously large city” and calls for change.
2. The power of one person’s witness can initiate the conversion of all.
3. As more and more “turn away” from old ways, the power of the suggestion is felt. People can see the results.
4. The destruction that would certainly come to a school from rampant disregard of persons is avoided.

Micah 4,1-3 and 6,8 (swords into plowshares, and “do what is right, love what is good, and walk humbly with God)

1. Short scriptures with long consequences.
2. These goals are not easily achieved. They suggest “ways of living” that presume conversion and resolve.
3. These goals of non-violence and walking with God can best be achieved in community, giving and receiving support from all sides.

Christian Scriptures:

Matthew 3,1-12 (The Preaching of John the Baptist) Mark 1,1-4. Luke 3,3-6.

1. “Prepare the way of the Lord.” We are called to make paths straight, so everyone can feel welcome, safe, and able to learn.
2. The Baptist proclaimed zero tolerance for those who do not repent! “We First” professes the same intolerance for bullying, but the bullies will *not* be thrown into the fire.

Matthew 5. Luke 6,20-26

1. Beatitudes, 3-12: These are the qualities of those who live in the reign of God.
2. 13-16: we cannot afford to lose our saltiness, that which makes our school unique.
Mark 9-49-50
3. 17-20: No tolerance for bullying. “Not even the smallest part.”
4. 38-42: No retaliation.
5. 43-48: Love your enemies. Love them so much that you will not tolerate less than they are capable of. Luke 6,27-36.

Matthew 7,7-12 (Be an answer to a prayer) Luke 11,9-13.

1. Those who are being bullied constantly utter a silent prayer: “Help me make it through this day.”
2. We can be the answer to those prayers. We have to be alert.
3. Even the least willing among us know what the bullied need. We have to pray for the courage to act, to do what we can to help.

Matthew 9,35-38 (Compassion)

1. Compassion is not a weakness. It is a quality of God. (We often pray to God for mercy.) So, to be compassionate, we are “like God.”

2. Our schools need more shepherd and laborers. Bullying prevention needs all of us. It is “we” who must be “first” to address it when we see it.

Matthew 10,40-42 (Nothing will go unnoticed)

1. We are acting in the person of Christ when we reach out to others, bullied and the bullies, and even the hesitant bystanders.
2. Taking initiative is a courageous thing, but the impact will be felt.

Matthew 13 (The Parable of the Sower and the Seed) Mark 4,1-9. Luke 8,4-8.

See this story in the appendix.

1. There is much potential in the Word of God. (18-23)
2. What is needed is rich, fertile, accepting soil.
3. We are constantly enriching the soil of the student body so that any and all opportunities for growth will bear great fruit.
4. We have the ears; we need to hear.

Matthew 14,13-21 (The Feeding of the Five Thousand, not counting the women and children)

Also, Matthew 15,32-39; Mark 6,34-44; Mark 8,1-9; Luke 9,10-17

1. The odds of satisfying such a huge crowd were daunting.
2. Jesus asked the disciples to feed them: “You give them something yourselves.”
3. The disciples focused on what little they had rather than trust in Jesus’ confidence in them.
4. The abundance left over is a sure sign that we too often underestimate what we can accomplish “by the grace of God.”

See the “group participation” version below

Matthew 15,21-28 (The Canaanite Woman’s Faith)

Teachers and parents can consider this passage for reflection. Imagine that the Canaanite is the bully. They cry out to get our attention. Their actions are despicable, but they truly need help. They get our attention by demeaning others, and in doing so, cry out: “I need help and I don’t know how to ask for it properly. I may even reject your offers, but don’t listen to me. I desperately need your help.”

This passage can remind teachers and parents that the troublemakers need more help than their victims sometimes. We need to resolve to treat them with the very kindness we often reserve for the targets of their aggression.

Matthew 17,14-20 (The possessed boy)

1. Being careful not to equate the possessed boy with the bullies, we are dealing here instead with the fact of bullying and violent behavior in schools.
2. The disciples were unable to bring about a cure. Even a well executed program will not guarantee results.
3. Jesus says we must have faith: even the size of a mustard seed will produce amazing results.

Matthew 18,10-14 (The lost sheep)

1. We cannot give up on anyone.
2. When someone who was a bully sees the light and experiences a change of heart, this is cause for great rejoicing.

Matthew 18,15-20 (Whoever sins)

1. Rationale for approaching any and all uncharitable behaviors.
2. In unity, there is strength. Get several members of the class to approach the wrong doer.
3. If all else fails, treat him as a tax collector. (Mt 9,9-13 → draw him into the fold!)

Mark 10,46-52 (Bartimeus, the blind man)

1. He was crying out to Jesus, but others tried to silence him. Bullies and other mischievous students are “crying out” in ways most of us do not understand.
2. Those who are blind want to see. They need to be brought to Jesus. That’s our job.

Luke 1,46-55 (The Magnificat)

1. Mary’s words capture the sentiment that each of us could confess: we are all remarkable creations with a unique mission.
2. God lifts up the lowly; those of us who are able will provide for them and protect them.
3. In our effort to give shape to the reign of God, we will restore justice.

Luke 7,36-50 (Forgiveness of the Sinful Woman)

1. Forgiveness leads to gratitude.
2. We must be conscientious in our treatment and rehabilitation of the bullies.
3. Then they will have much to be grateful for.

Luke 11,24-26 (The Return of the Unclean Spirit)

1. Establishing and maintaining a positive, supportive environment in schools takes everyone’s effort, all the time.
2. Vigilance through artwork, class meetings, and regular commendations from the administrator all help to preserve whatever progress has been achieved.

Luke 15 *See the Prodigal Rap in the Activities section*

1. Parable of the Lost Sheep (1-7): great rejoicing over the return of the lost sheep.
2. Parable of the Lost Coin (8-10): in this case, a coin of great sentimental value. At school, every one is a “rare coin.” No exceptions.
3. Parable of the Lost Son (11-32): God’s love for us never fades.

Luke 16,19-31 (Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus)

1. There are no “more” or “less” worthy students.
2. We are all here, in this school, to serve each other’s needs.
3. Missed opportunities will remain forever “missed.”
4. Let’s get over our prejudices.

John 4,4-42 (The Samaritan Woman at the Well) *See participative gospel version below*

John 14,12-14 (And even greater things)

1. Faithful people can do the things that Jesus did, and even greater.
2. Ask, and I will help you.

Acts 2,42-47 (Communal Life)

1. A community that is committed to look after the needs of all members can be a powerful witness.
2. Every day they were deliberate in their intention and service.
3. Every day new people joined their numbers.
4. It is possible to engender the same kind of spirit in a school community, but it takes the effort of all. It will be a contagious spirit.

Romans 6,5-11 (Life in Christ)

1. Likeness to death in Christ means we can look forward to participation in the Resurrection.
2. We can put old ways behind us. We are a redeemed people who live quite differently now.

Romans 12,3-8 (Many parts, many gifts)

1. No one should think of himself or herself more highly than others.
2. The gifts we have are just that – “gifts”. Use them.
3. What are the gifts in your classroom? If you don’t know yours, perhaps your friends can help you identify what it is.

Romans 12,9-21 (The Golden Rule and more)

1. A marvelous litany of what to do in our care for each other.
2. Do not repay evil with more evil; do not retaliate.
3. Have students prioritize the many challenges listed here.
4. Imagine what school would be like if everyone complied with Paul’s charges here!

I Corinthians 9,19-23 (All things to everyone)

1. Paul tried to be approachable to all.
2. We have to acknowledge not everyone will be willing to intervene during instances of bullying.
3. We have to accept that bullies will resist our openness, but we must maintain our concern for their needs as well.

I Corinthians 12,14-26 *See “group participation” version below*

1. What goes around, comes around, precisely because the school is a closed environment and we are all connected.
2. Every part *needs* every other part.
3. It would be good to seek out and celebrate everybody’s gift.
4. Suffering and rejoicing are group activities.

II Corinthians 4,7-18 (The Paradox of Ministry)

1. Faithful people see things differently. We see with the eyes of Christ.
2. In the eyes of the world, we seem to be foolish. But through our ministry, “the grace bestowed in abundance on more and more people may cause the thanksgiving to overflow for the glory of God.” (v.15)
3. Paul offers all “We First” believers a word of encouragement.

II Corinthians 6,1-10 (What it is like to support “We First”)

1. We commit to the goals of the program and we believe God will sustain us.
2. We are willing to sacrifice in the hope of achieving our goals.

Galatians 6,1-10 (Every can do something)

1. Be faithful to the expectations you have of yourself.
2. Help each other in every way you can. Don't leave anyone unprotected!
3. A person will reap only what he/she sows.

Ephesians 4,1-6 (Oneness in the Body)

1. "Live in a manner worthy of the call you have received."
2. We are one.

Ephesians 4,25-32 (Rules for getting along with each other)

1. Speak the truth. Intervene when you see injustice.
2. Be kind to one another, even the troublemakers.

Ephesians 5,6-14 (Light)

1. Live as children of the light.
2. You know the difference between darkness and light. Choose light.

Philippians 2,1-4 (*and* 6-11 for older students: the Attitude of Christ)

1. Do nothing out of selfishness, but regard others as more important than yourselves.
2. If everyone looks out for someone else, none of us having anything to fear.

James 2,14-17 (Faith and works)

1. Our concern for others should *show* in our actions.
2. Keep faith alive through good works.

Finally, The Heart of the Gospel citations in the appendix contain numerous scripture references specific to the twelve calls. Any one of those brief selections can become the focal point of a prayer service.

Group participation

Students, and everyone else for that matter, seem to pay closer attention to the Word when they are given an active listening role. Below you will find a few samples of scriptures that our ministry has adapted by assigning “parts,” words and gestures, to various sections of the assembly. At the signal they are invited to speak or gesture their rehearsed parts. The leader is responsible for assigning and rehearsing the part so everyone feels prepared.

Care should be taken to proclaim the Word respectfully, but the very reading and participation is likely to induce a joy-filled response. There is nothing wrong with that. Is there?

Matthew 14,13-21: You feed them, or “Take-out for Five Thousand Plus”

The leader teaches the four parts below, and advises the assembly that they should respond when the leader points to their section.

Parts: **DEAR GOD** – arms open in a pleading gesture when the words are said
YOU – point back to the leader
TWO – two fingers up when the number is announced
FIVE – five fingers up along with the number announced

The story of Jesus healing and feeding the five thousand, not counting women and children, somewhat according to Matthew.

When Jesus got the news, about the death of John the Baptist,
he slipped away by boat to an out-of-the-way place by himself.

But unsuccessfully—

someone saw him and the word got around.

Soon a lot of people from the nearby villages walked around the lake to where he was.

When he saw them coming, he was overcome with pity and healed their sick.

Toward evening the disciples approached him.

"We're out in the country and it's getting late.

Dismiss the people, **DEAR GOD**, so they can go to the villages and get some supper."

But Jesus said,

"There is no need to dismiss them.

YOU give them supper."

"All we have are **FIVE** loaves of bread and **TWO** fish," they said.

Jesus said, "Bring them here." Then he had the people sit on the grass.

He took the **FIVE** loaves and **TWO** fish,

lifted his face to heaven in prayer,

“DEAR GOD, my disciples want me to feed your children

And all the while they have food to share –

FIVE loaves and **TWO** fish to be exact.
I pray that **YOU** help me open their eyes and help them to see.”

Then Jesus blessed, broke, and gave the bread to the disciples.
The disciples then gave the food to those who had gathered.
YOU wouldn't believe it. They all ate their fill.
They gathered twelve baskets of leftovers. **DEAR GOD!**
About **FIVE** thousand were fed.

The Gospel of the Lord

John 4 -- The Woman at the Well

Parts: **Five** – five fingers up with the number announced
Water – both hands high with fingers spread; as the word is spoken with a high breathy tone, ripple the fingers back and forth as they come down
Amen – with an index finger in the air, as if making a point when saying “Amen”
Whoa – as if surprised when saying whoa in a “wait just a minute” tone

The story of Jesus meeting the Woman at the Well, somewhat according to John

Jesus had to pass through Samaria

Whoa

The disciples had gone into the city to get some provisions.
Jacob's well was in the center of town. Jesus was tired, so he sat down.
As he watched his chosen head off to the market place, Jesus wondered why he had chosen twelve disciples, when he could have done with

Five.

About that time, a woman

Whoa

from Samaria came to draw some

Water.

Jesus said to her: “Give me a drink of

Water.”

Whoa.

“You are asking me, a Samaritan, and woman for a drink!!

If you only knew who was asking you for

Water,

you would be asking me for a drink and I would give you living

Water.”

Amen.

“Sir,” said the woman. “You have no bucket!”

Whoa.

“Who do you think you are? Greater than our father Jacob, who drank from this well along with his children and his flocks?”

Jesus said:

“Amen, amen.

Anyone who drinks from this well will thirst again, but the one who drinks the living

Water

I provide will never thirst. The

Water

I will give will become a living spring, welling up to eternal life.”

She said. “I’ll take it.”

Jesus said, “go get your husband.”

Whoa.

“Haven’t got ONE,” she said.

“Right,” Jesus said, “but you’ve had

Five

And the one you are with now is still up in the air!”

“I can see you are a prophet,” said the woman.

Amen.

“What church do you attend? She asked.

“Sts. Spirit and Truth,” Jesus said.

“Will the Messiah be there?” she asked.

Amen.

“I’ll take you myself,” he said. “Now, how about that

Water

I asked for. . !”

In the meantime, the disciples came back from the town with the take-out order. Not just

Five

but all twelve returned.”

The woman left Jesus, heading back to home, telling all she met to “come and see.” The disciples asked Jesus to eat something.

“Not hungry,” he said. “I am already full. Stuffed, as a matter of fact. I came to satisfy hunger and thirst and that is what I am doing. You are to do the same.”

Shortly, the woman returned with the whole town in hot pursuit. They came to see Jesus, to see for themselves. He stayed for two days, not

Five,

Just two days, but that was enough. Many more of the townspeople began to believe in him because of his word. They said to the woman: “We no longer believe because of your word, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the savior of the world.”

Whoa.

Amen. Amen.

The Gospel of the Lord

I Corinthians 12, 14 ff: One Body, Many Parts

This selection from Paul will bring home the truth that we are all connected. Not only does the teaching demonstrate that, but the "telling" will manifest everyone's eagerness to do their part. This time, the leader says the word in the reading and the six groups are assigned the gesture and a corresponding sound. For smaller assemblies, the entire group can be asked to do the gesture and whistle for the word "Body."

The Parts:

Body – wolf whistle while brushing back hair

Foot – all say "whew" with a wave of the hand over a raised foot

Hand – all wave with a joyful "hi"

Ear – all members of this group cup a hand over a hard-of-hearing ear and say "eh?"

Eye – with a demonstrative finger in the air, all say "I see"

Nose – everyone holds the nose and says "Oh brother"

A reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

Now the **body**

is not a single part, but many. If a **foot**

should say, "Because I am not a **hand**

I do not belong to the **body**,"

it does not for this reason belong any less to the **body**.

Or if an **ear**

should say, "Because I am not an **eye**

I do not belong to the **body**,"

it does not for this reason belong any less to the **body**.

If the whole **body**

were an **eye**,

what would be left for the **ear**?

If the whole **body**

were an **ear**,

what would be left for the **nose**?

But as it is, God placed the parts,

foot,

hand,

ear,

eye,

and **nose,**

each one of them, in the **body**

according to a plan. If they were all one part, where would the **body**

be? But as it is, there are many parts, yet one **body**.

The **eye**

cannot say to the **hand**,

"I do not need you." nor again the head to the **feet**,

"I do not need you." Indeed, the parts of the **body**

that seem to be weaker are the more necessary,
and those parts of the **body**
that we consider less honorable we surround with greater honor,
so as to give greater honor to a part that is without it, so that there may be no division in the
body,
but that the parts may have the same concern for one another. If one part suffers, all the parts
suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share it joy.

The Word of the Lord

Petitions, Charges, Blessings

It is often helpful to invite affirmation of the theme or goal by assigning a simple response for everyone to proclaim in unison. In this case, the words “WE FIRST” remind everyone of the name of the program. This format works well at the conclusion of a prayer service just prior to a final song. The leader simply invites everyone to respond with the words “We First” after each of the following questions:

Leader: Who will make this school a peaceful place every day?
All: “WE FIRST”

Who will accept as an equal any sister or brother who comes through our door?
“WE FIRST”

Who will see someone in need and stop to help?
“WE FIRST”

Who will challenge another student when they witness violence or disrespect?
“WE FIRST”

Who will admit his or her own wrongdoing and pledge to make a better choice next time?
“WE FIRST”

Who among us will be courageous enough to ask for forgiveness from others when we
have offended them?
“WE FIRST”

Who will remind us, by their example, that we are called to serve one another?
“WE FIRST”

Who will be a disciple of Jesus and a witness to the Gospel?
“WE FIRST”

Who will make this school a place for peace every day?
“WE FIRST”

Parts Blessing

This follow the leader blessing has been road tested and found worthy. It is especially appreciated by the wee folk. Leaders should feel free to adapt to their own taste. Not all the sections are necessary each time. Pick and choose including two or more paragraphs and the final section each time.

Leader: "Just follow me in word and action for this final blessing."

Hands in the air and appropriate gestures to follow. . . .

Oh Lord,
Look at these hands.
Aren't they wonderful?
They can point.
They can wave hello.
They can welcome.
They can hug too.
They're so handy!
Help us, Lord,
Make sure
These hands
Are always ready
To be there for others.
Amen.

Hands on either side of the face. . . .

Oh my, Lord,
Look at these faces
Made in your image.
(Pause briefly)
My, are you good lookin'!!
And you know what else?
You got a great sense of humor.
Help us always
To see your face
In all the faces we see.
Amen.

Grab ears and extend them. . . .

Hey Lord,
Get a load of these.
One on each side.
Please speak directly
Into the holes.
There're connected to our heart.
Let those of us
Who have ears to hear. . .

Listen!
Amen.

Hand flapping between heart and hand hovering over the heart. .

Hey, Lord!
Bless these hearts.
And keep them going.
May there always be room
In these hearts
For those who need it.
Lots of room.
Always.
Amen.

Hands out to either side. . .

Hey Lord,
Here we are.
All together. (dancing)
From top (hand on head)
To bottom (on the "backside")
We
Think
You
Do
Nice
Work!!
Thanks
For keeping us together.
(feel free to continue to ad lib according to theme of the event)
Bless us all
In the name of the Creator (point up, arm fully extended)
The Redeemer (arms out to either side)
And the Sanctifier (hands tucked under arms and elbows flapping)
A-a-a-a-a-men.

'Nother Blessing

Grateful for this time,
Let us leave our prayer and reflection,
But bring with us the Spirit on unity and peace.
Faithful and resolved, let us be mindful of the needs of others.
Gracious God, bless us all.
AMEN.

Reflections

On September 12, 2001, I received the “Vow of Nonviolence” in the mail. Apparently, I had ordered a copy from a Pax Christi “clearance sale” several weeks prior. With the smoldering remains of the Twin Towers on television, I read through these lines slowly. Very slowly.

Certain words and phrases loomed large: “violence in my own heart,” “one year,” “love your enemies,” “persecute,” “accepting suffering,” “refusing to retaliate,” “conscientiously.” I stood stunned, reading and re-reading a page I had ordered, words I had asked for, a vow I was hesitant to consider taking at that time. But I have come back to these words many times since. It would be valuable for older students and adults in your school to do the same.

There is too much here for one reading, but this vow could be introduced as part of a prayer service and be the object of study, research, and reflection for many days thereafter. These words can be easily published and posted for all to see, every day.

Vow of Nonviolence

Recognizing the violence in my own heart, yet trusting in the goodness and mercy of God, I vow, for one year, to practice the nonviolence of Jesus who taught us in the Sermon on the Mount:

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons and daughters of God... You have learned how it was said, ‘You must love your neighbor and hate your enemy;’ But I say to you, ‘Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you. In this way, you will be daughters and sons of your Creator in heaven.’”

Before God, the Creator and the Sanctifying Spirit, I vow to carry out in my life, the love and example of Jesus –

- by striving for peace within myself and seeking to be a peacemaker in my daily life;
- by accepting suffering rather than inflicting it;
- by refusing to retaliate in the face of provocation and violence;
- by persevering in nonviolence of tongue and heart;
- by living conscientiously and simply so that I do not deprive others of the means to live;
- by actively resisting evil and working nonviolently to abolish war and the causes of war from my own heart and from the face of the earth.

God, I trust in Your sustaining love and believe that just as You gave me the grace and desire to offer this, so You will also bestow abundant grace to fulfill it.

*From Pax Christi USA
532 West 8th Street
Erie, PA 16502
paxchristiusa.org*

“Our Deepest Fear” by Marianne Williamson

It is the exception when I encounter a group of junior high students who exude confidence and self-esteem. Too often I find young teenagers who are unsure of themselves. It seems they have to check with their peers to find out if they are talented or not, capable or not, and to some extent, whether they “believe” or not. Good grades and prowess on the athletic field serves to dispel some of that mistrust of self, but I wonder how it came to be that so many gifted and bright young students hesitate when it comes to acknowledging their abilities.

The quote from Ms. Williamson below provides a key to understanding this puzzle. “Fear” is the paralyzing force that holds kids back, keeps them from trusting what they know and building on what they have discovered.

The quote suggests it is a fear of accomplishment, a fear of success. It is a fear of greatness that prompts us to linger in the shadows a while longer. Perhaps ultimately, it is a fear of service, for once we acknowledge we have a lot to offer, the time will have arrived for us to start offering. That takes getting used to. But if service is what gives our life meaning, what are we waiting for?

This is another reflection piece that can be introduced during a prayer service and kept handy for future reference. A decorative copy could adorn a bulletin board within easy reference to the students.

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.

We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?
Actually, who are you not to be?
You are a child of God.

Your playing small does not serve the world.
There is nothing enlightening about shrinking
so that other people won't feel unsure around you.

We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.

It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone.

As we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same;
as we are liberated from our own fear,
our presence automatically liberates others.

From A Return to Love , Harper Collins, 1993

Jubilee 2000 Pledge: The Jubilee of Jesus' birth calls us "to bring glad tidings to the poor. . . to bring liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free." (Luke 4,18 based on Isaiah 61)

The beginning of the next millennium loomed large in the approaching years and months. Industrialized nations around the world prepared for computer crashes while the poorest among us hoped simply for a successful harvest. The Catholic Church seized the opportunity to remind the faithful of the significance of the Jubilee year, an opportunity every fifty years to not only recall but to embrace with new fervor the most fundamental beliefs that guide and inform our relationships with others.

"You shall have the trumpet sounded loud
You shall hallow the fiftieth year
You shall proclaim liberty throughout the land
It shall be a jubilee for you."

Leviticus 25,9-10

"Jubilee is a call for right relations among people and with God's creation. It is a call that is echoed elsewhere in the Hebrew scripture and which is central to Jesus' ministry to 'bring good news to the poor . . . to proclaim release to the captives and . . . to let the oppressed go free.' (Luke4,18) While the word 'Jubilee' may not be a centerpiece of biblical writing, the concept of Jubilee is an absolutely central theme of our living faith. At Jubilee, slaves were to be set free, debts were to be forgiven, wealth was to be equitably and generously shared among all, and the land was to be given rest from its labor." [Celebrate Jubilee and Justice! A workbook form the Center for Concern, Washington DC]

Most importantly, the Jubilee's message was that the cause for justice and freedom was never intended to be up for review only at fifty-year intervals. The needs of the poor and equal justice for all are a constant concern for God's faithful. The Jubilee is a festival time that reminds us of our year-round, all the time mission. What was celebrated in banner and procession in 2000 ought to be a way of life for us, a daily focus for Judeo-Christian people.

So the pledge below is a current event. It spells out the some of the many ways a "We First" community can give shape to their surroundings by fostering personal growth and change in the larger community. There is nothing about this pledge that needs to be "dusted off" or edited for it to be timely and to the point. All that is left if for those who recite it to flesh it out in their particular setting. Year to year they can identify short-term goals that would enhance the wellbeing of all students. One year may focus on prejudice and another may bring a heightened awareness of our role in preserving the pristine beauty of God's creation on our school grounds.

In the end, those who take the pledge seriously will assume the responsibility of creating and maintaining a just and supportive environment in their school community. That is among the first and most important tenets of a "We First" approach to helping a school be bullying free.

As disciples of Jesus in the new millennium, I pledge to:

PRAY regularly for greater justice and peace.

LEARN more about Catholic social teaching and its call to protect human life, stand with the poor, and care for creation.

REACH across boundaries of religion, race, ethnicity, gender, and disabling conditions.

LIVE justly in family life, school, work, the marketplace, and the political arena.

SERVE those who are poor and vulnerable, sharing more time and talent.

GIVE more generously to those in need at home and abroad.

ADVOCATE for public policies that protect human life, promote human dignity, preserve God's creation, and build peace.

ENCOURAGE others to work for greater charity, justice, and peace.

Book resources for teachers, administrators, counselors, and parents:

Living God's Justice. The Roundtable Association of Diocesan Social Action Directors. St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2006. *This is a book of "greatest hits" compiled by leadership from justice offices in diocese coast to coast. It is well indexed and referenced and will become your "go to" book when you need an inspirational piece to begin, end, or enhance a meeting. Buy two. You'll end up giving one away.*

Guerrillas of Grace: Prayers for the Battle. Ted Loder. Augsburg Books, Minneapolis MN. 1984. *Poetic and more reflective and introspective, you will find every page challenging. This is a great book for people in leadership roles.*

An Internet search for "Golden Rule and World Religions" will take you to religioustolerance.org. This website lists more than two-dozen excerpts from sacred scriptures of various world religions. There is a common thread, a golden thread, that runs through every reference. It would be a valuable experience for students to research the various religions and where they are observed in the world. It may be gratifying for them to discover that this fundamental belief has been revered everywhere for a long, long time.

You already have Chicken Soup books and some trusty volumes from Fr. Edward Hayes, various renditions of the psalms and loads of book with hymns on your bookshelf. Add these two to the mix.

Creating the Church of Tomorrow

Often attributed to Archbishop Oscar Romero, 1917–1980, this piece was originally written by the former bishop of Saginaw MI, Bishop Ken Untener, 1938–2004, to be used in a homily presented by the archbishop of Detroit, John Cardinal Dearden, 1907-1988).

It speaks for itself. It is a humble testimony that none of us is indispensable, but each has a role that is vital. It is an appropriate expression for those who believe in the contribution everyone makes to a “We First” initiative.

It helps, now and then,
to step back and take a long view.
The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,
it is even beyond our vision.
We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction
of the magnificent enterprise that is God’s work.
Nothing we do is complete,
which is a way of saying that
the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that should be said;
No prayer fully confesses our faith;
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about:

We plant seeds
that one day will grow or maybe die;
We water seeds already planted,
knowing that they hold future promise;
We lay foundations
that will need further development;
We provide yeast that produces effects
far beyond our capabilities.
We cannot do everything,
and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.
This enables us to do something and to do it very well.
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning;
a step along the way.
It is an opportunity for divine grace to enter
and do the rest.
We may never see the results.
We are workers,
not master builders;
We are prophets of a future that is not our own.