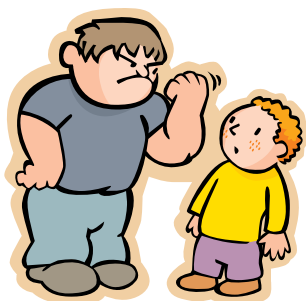


Peace Be with Us

Anti-Bullying Worship Activities Based on Lectionary Readings
for September 24, 2006 (Year B) through May 13, 2007 (Year C)



Introduction

This booklet offers suggestions for including an anti-bullying theme in your worship, with the focus on the children in your congregation. These suggestions also fit the themes of peace and of living in right relationship—considering God’s call to build relationships that are just, equitable, and renewing.

Year B

September 24, 2006 (Proper 20)

Children will relate to the texts this week because children have experienced the desire to be “the greatest” (Mark 9:30–37). They also know desire can lead to conflicts with friends and schoolmates, and perhaps even to choices and actions that are later regretted (James 3:13—4:3, 7–8a). Emphasize the importance of doing good over being great.

Consider using a responsive prayer of confession. Invite your congregation to pray using their hands to portray the dangers of some of our desires and the actions to which they lead. Someone might lead the movements as the prayer is spoken. Encourage the congregation to follow the movements of the leader as they pray. When the prayer mentions risky feelings or actions, everyone clenches their fists. As they respond, “Help us to let go,” they open their hands.

Leader: Gracious God, it is easy for us to want what others have. (*clench fists*) We want clothes

with the right labels, big houses in the right neighbourhood, cars, electronics, and fabulous holidays. We prefer to grab onto what we have and keep it all for ourselves

People: Help us to let go of our wants (*open hands*) and reach out to others with generosity.

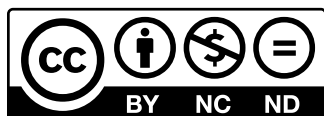
Leader: God, it is easy for us to look at others and be jealous of them. (*clench fists*) We envy their looks or talents or relationships. We prefer to hold onto envy, spitefulness, and anger.

People: Help us to let go of our jealousy (*open hands*) and reach out to others in friendship.

Leader: God, it is easy for us to act uncooperative and selfish. (*clench fists*) We want to do what we want, when we want, the way we want. We prefer to hold onto our self-centred and bossy ways.

People: Help us to let go of our selfishness (*open hands*) and reach out to others with cooperation.

All: May we always remember the hands of Christ reaching out to us in forgiveness and love. Amen.



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October 1, 2006 (Proper 21)

Children may not be familiar with the story of Esther (Esther 7:1–6, 9–10; 9:20–22), but they will cheer for the underdog who beat out the bully using brains rather than brawn.

God is with Esther in her strategy to save her people. In the gospel text (Mark 9:38–50) Jesus reminds the disciples, “Whoever is not against us is for us” (vs. 40) and that it is dangerous to put a stumbling block in front of “little ones” (vs. 42). Emphasize that we can show we are for God by taking responsibility for younger and smaller children, and that God will be with us in these endeavours.

Consider creating a cheer for those on “God’s team” and using it as a Call to Worship:

Leader: We are here to worship a God who is with us!

People: Hooray for God’s presence!

Leader: We are here to give thanks for people of courage!

People: Hooray for God’s team!

Leader: We are here to learn about Esther and Mordecai, James and John!

People: Hooray for God’s saints!

Leader: We are here to celebrate our own faithfulness and courage. To remember that we are on God’s team when we stand with courage against bullies, when we take the side of those younger and weaker than we are, when we resist evil and injustice in every form!

People: Hooray for God’s people in this age and every age!

October 15, 2006 (Proper 23)

Children can relate to the fact that following Jesus is not always easy. Discipleship may lead us into situations we find hard to get through. It can seem easier to turn away from God than to face the difficulties of faithful living.

When a child encounters another person being bullied, it may be easier to walk away rather than stand up to the injustice or ask an adult for help. Disciples of Jesus are sometimes called to do the hard thing, knowing God is supporting them.

For children who may not know, explain to them an “eye of a needle” (Mark 10:25) so they will understand why the man in the story and the disciples were shocked at Jesus’ response (Mark 10:22, 26). Emphasize that while following Jesus may be difficult, there are rich rewards (Mark 10:17).

As the service ends, invite the children to form “eyes of needles” by facing each other in pairs, arching their arms over their heads, and clasping hands. Station them at the exits and ask your congregation to walk through the eyes of the needles. Offer a benediction: “Go out with boldness and know that you will receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).

Encourage the children to offer words of reassurance as people squeeze through the openings they create: “God is walking with you into the world.”

October 22, 2006 (Proper 24) Peace Sunday

On this Peace Sunday, offer calls to peace in homes, schools, playgrounds, and other places that are familiar to children.

If you’re using the gospel text from the lectionary (Mark 10:35–45), point out that Jesus asks James and John, “What do you want me to do for you?” Invite the congregation to consider the question from different perspectives: How might someone who is being bullied respond to Jesus’ question? How might a bully respond? How might children, teachers, and parents respond?

Point out that Jesus encourages people to serve one another and that those in power should not tyrannize or bully those who are weaker. Be careful to emphasize that serving another does not mean one should allow the other to be a bully. There is reciprocity in the relationships Jesus describes here.

November 19, 2006 (Proper 28) Children's Sunday

Children's Sunday is not only an occasion to include children in preparing for and leading the service, but also to lift up children's issues and the sometimes unpleasant realities of childhood.

Several weeks ahead, talk with the children in your congregation about the issue of bullying and see if it is something they would like to explore in terms of worshipping God, following Jesus, and loving their neighbour.

How can songs and prayers help us deal with bullying? What can children teach adults about bullying?

If you're using the lectionary texts for the week, consider looking at the gospel (Mark 13:1–8) from the perspective that God endures and we can hope in and rely on God even in the midst of trying times. Sometimes (especially times of turmoil), we want to turn toward strong people (bullies?) who may lead us away from God. It is important not to follow others unquestioningly when we are fearful, but instead to stay focused on what God calls us to be and do and to stand strong in our convictions.

Sing Linnea Good's "Like a Rock" (Borealis Music, 1999). (In 2007 this song will be published by United Church Publishing House and Wood Lake Books in the new *More Voices* hymnbook. Contact information for Linnea may be found at www.linneagood.com.)

Year C

December 3, 2006 (Advent 1)

Children can understand the fear, anxiety, and shame an enemy can cause us to feel, emotions that are apparent in the Psalm (25:1–10) and the gospel (Luke 21:25–26). Children (and adults) need to hear the reassurance and hope found in all of the lectionary texts that God never forgets them and is always with them, even when it seems as if they are alone.

Children who are being bullied walk in fear and solitude, often deserted by friends who are fearful of becoming victims themselves. Knowing that through the ages others have felt this way and yet have known God's loving presence can give us hope and comfort that we, too, will come through whatever turmoil we are experiencing.

In the Children's Time, invite the children to "plant" a dry branch in a can of soil as a sign of

hope even when life seems discouraging. Talk with the children about their fears and hopes, and remind them of God's loving presence in their daily lives. Tell them that throughout Advent they will participate in bringing life to the lifeless branch through their prayers and actions. Place the branch on the communion table or another prominent place in your worship space. Pray that God's wisdom and justice may be made known in places of fear and unfairness.

If you are lighting candles on an Advent wreath, remember God's gift of the earth that sustains and nurtures us as a sign of God's enduring love and care. (See the May 2006 issue of *Mandate* magazine, available from United Church Resource Distribution, for more ideas.)

December 10, 2006 (Advent 2)

Preparation, repentance, and salvation are key words for this week's lectionary readings. We prepare for the one sent by God as we seek and offer forgiveness, change our ways, and walk with God. Children will understand repentance if it's explained in their terms. For example, we can be sorry that we didn't clean up our dishes as we had been asked. But when we repent, we remember to clean up our dishes without having to be asked. The message of the writer of the Gospel of Luke is good news—all will see salvation! One definition of salvation is to be freed from or kept from evil or danger.

Consider calling the children to the Children's Time with a bell, horn, or chime. Tell them that in the gospel text (Luke 3:1–6) John is sounding an alarm or giving a warning. He uses his voice to call people to prepare for their salvation through repentance. What are some other warning sounds and messages we hear? How can bullies, the bullied, and the bystander change their ways (repent) and be freed from or kept from danger (salvation)? How can we use our voices to sound the alarm about the problem of bullying? How can we call others to walk in God's way in a manner that shows God's love?

Add cut-outs, ornaments, or something to symbolize bells, horns, or sirens to the branch that was planted last week.

If you are lighting candles on an Advent wreath, remember God's gifts of breath and Spirit that assist us as we speak up for those who have a hard time finding their voices. (See the May 2006 issue of *Mandate* magazine, available from The United Church of Canada, for more ideas.)

December 17, 2006 (Advent 3)

The good news (Luke 3:18) John the Baptizer proclaimed may not seem so good to us.

But the people who came to hear him and be baptized simply asked, "What should we do?" They wanted to know more about how to prepare for the one who would come with power and fire.

Children know how it feels to wait and prepare for someone special to come. They will also understand that we often learn the most from the people who ask the most of us.

Talk to the children about how they might prepare if a very special person were coming to see them. For example, if Hayley Wickenheiser or Sidney Crosby were coming to coach their hockey team, would the children spend more time practising? If Roberta Bondar were coming to teach their science class, would the children study harder to prepare? (Use examples that have meaning in your context.)

In today's gospel text, John encourages his followers to prepare for the coming of the Messiah (Jesus). He wants them to be ready for the call to discipleship Jesus will offer. It isn't necessarily going to be easy to follow Jesus, just as it isn't easy to play professional hockey or become an astronaut. It takes hard work, but the rewards are worth it.

It is also hard work to stop bullying, but imagine what the rewards might be. How might preventing bullying be a way of preparing for the coming of Jesus into our own lives and community? What should we do to prepare for Jesus' coming?

Add a string of lights to your branch from last week to symbolize the fire and Holy Spirit with which John says the Messiah will come.

If you are lighting candles on an Advent wreath, remember the power of fire to provide light, energy, and warmth as well as to purge and burn. (See the May 2006 issue of *Mandate* magazine, available from United Church Resource Distribution, for more ideas.)

December 24, 2006 (Advent 4)

The readings from the Gospel of Luke, the Psalm, and Micah remind us that God often chooses the unlikely, the weak, and the small to be bearers of God's good news and to change the world.

Children know what it's like to not be chosen and can understand Mary's excitement and joy when she is chosen by God for a very special role. The texts remind us that God doesn't necessarily look for the biggest, the best, the richest, or the most popular to do God's work.

Talk to the children about how they feel when chosen for a special responsibility or role. Tell them that Mary felt excited and joyful when she was chosen to be the mother of Jesus. Remind them that she was a teenager from a very small town when she was chosen by God. Mary probably felt anxious and afraid about her new responsibility. God also chose the small village of Bethlehem as the place for Jesus to be born.

Sometimes God's choices seem unusual to us. When God chooses us, God also gives us the strength to do what we need to do. We feel small and weak when we're being bullied or when we see a friend being bullied and as though there is nothing we can do to stop the trouble. When we feel this way, we can remember Mary and the village of Bethlehem and know that God will be with us, giving us strength and encouragement.

Cut out stars or find small star-shaped ornaments to add to the branch as a reminder that a young girl and a small village starred in the story of Jesus' birth. We can shine for God, too, as we follow in Jesus' way of peace and justice-making.

If you are lighting candles on an Advent wreath, remember the waters of the womb that nurtured the babies of Mary and Elizabeth and each of us. (See the May 2006 issue of *Mandate*

magazine, available from United Church Resource Distribution, for more ideas.)

January 7, 2007 (Baptism of Jesus)

This week's lectionary texts focus on the gift of the Holy Spirit received in baptism and the presence of God in daily life. Children will appreciate hearing the message of Isaiah (43:1-7), in which God says that God loves us, God calls us by name, God is with us, and we belong to God.

In the passage from the gospel of Luke (3:15-17, 21-22), God's presence is experienced through a dove and a voice. Jesus and others present at his baptism hear the message of God's love and God's pleasure in him.

Incorporate a breath prayer into your service today. In this form of intercessory prayer we repeat a word or phrase, often from the Bible, as we breathe in and out. The Hebrew word *ruach* means wind, breath, or spirit. As we breathe in and out, focusing on God and our own breath, we can be aware of God's Spirit in us and surrounding us. Children who are being bullied, or anyone who is in a stressful situation, may be reassured by the thought that God is as close as our own breath and we belong to God.

Suggest that people choose phrases from today's lectionary texts to use as breath prayers in the coming week:

- "Do not fear, for I am with you." (Isaiah 43:5)
- "I have called you by name, you are mine." (Isaiah 43:1)
- "I will be with you." (Isaiah 43:2)
- "You are my beloved child; I am pleased with you." (Luke 3:22)
- "May God give me strength!" (Psalm 29:11a)
- "May God give me peace!" (Psalm 29:11b)

January 28, 2007 (Fourth Sunday after Epiphany)

Through today's lectionary texts we learn that God often calls unlikely people to speak God's message. Jeremiah was only a boy (Jeremiah 1:6) when God called him to speak. To the people of Nazareth Jesus was only Joseph's boy (Luke 4:22) when he was called to speak in the synagogue.

No matter what our age is or whether we feel worthy, God may call us to speak and act. The other side of the message is that God may call other people we wouldn't choose to speak and act for God. Either way, the important message is that God calls people to speak and act with love.

Suggest ways that people might speak and act while showing God's love. God may be calling someone to speak up because he or she knows someone who is being bullied. Incorporate a time of silence into your service so that people might listen deeply for the voice of God calling them into right relationship.

The Jeremiah text could easily be dramatized using a Reader's Theatre (no memorization) format. Only two people are needed: Jeremiah as a young boy, and God.

God: Jeremiah, can you hear me?

Jeremiah: (*looking around*) Who's that? Where are you?

God: Jeremiah, it's me—God.

Jeremiah: Well, what do you want?

God: Before you were born; before you were even in your mother's body, I chose you. I decided you would be a prophet and tell others about me.

Jeremiah: But God, I don't know the right words to say. Anyway, I'm just a kid!

God: Don't say you're "just a kid." I want you to tell others about me, and I'll help you know what to say. (*holds hand up to Jeremiah's mouth*)

Here, I'm giving you the words I want you to say for me.

Jeremiah: Okay, God, I'll give it a try.

God: Don't be afraid. It won't be easy, but I'll be with you.

February 4, 2007 (Fifth Sunday after Epiphany)

In today's lectionary texts we meet three people (Isaiah, Paul, and Peter) who were called by God but did not feel worthy of the task. All of them were awed and transformed by their experience of God.

Children may be more open to an experience of God and aware of God's faithful presence than adults. Remind everyone that as we become more aware of God's amazing presence in our lives and in all of creation, we can be changed and God's love and light can shine through us.

Consider the tasks to which God might call us and for which we might feel unworthy. Remind listeners that God did not punish Isaiah, Paul, or Peter for their past actions or for their current doubts. Instead, God gave them great responsibilities. The same is true for us; God is not interested in punishing us for past failures but instead calls us to meaningful work that expands our capabilities. God may be asking us to speak or act against bullying in a way we may not feel worthy or prepared to do. But as we seek and recognize God's presence, we may find ourselves capable of even the most difficult task.

As people leave the service today, offer a charge and blessing that calls them to go into the world, aware of God's love and presence and believing that God will help them know what to do and say:

Along with Isaiah let us say, "Here I am, send me." Along with Peter let us be eager to do what is good. Along with

Paul let us go into the world, into our community, our neighbourhoods, and our schools, into our workplaces and homes, proclaiming the good news of God's transforming love.

April 15, 2007 (Second Sunday in Easter)

In the gospel reading for today (John 20:19–31) the first words Jesus speaks in this post-resurrection appearance are “Peace be with you.” He says these words not once but three times in this passage. It is clear Jesus wants his frightened and uncertain followers to be at peace. He links peace with the gift of the Holy Spirit and the ability to forgive.

Peace is not just the absence of war. Peace requires authentic respect for the dignity and rights of every human being. Peace maintains the belief that God acts in all of human life and loves and forgives all. Peace calls for social equality and an end to exploitation of the weak. Peace is the absence of bullying on the playground, in homes, in business, and in government. Peace is forgiveness. Children need to hear that Jesus wants everyone to experience the peace of God: the bullied, the bullies, and those who allow bullying to continue.

Greet the congregation with “Peace be with you.” As a benediction at the end of the service, invite everyone to turn to someone near them, blow gently in her or his face, and repeat, “Receive the Holy Spirit. Peace be with you.” This action requires a great deal of vulnerability but can be quite meaningful.

The reading from Acts (5:27–32) depicts Peter and the apostles in serious conflict with the religious authorities. They had been given strict orders not to teach in the name of Jesus but had continued to do so. In today's text, Peter

and the apostles have been called to account for their disobedience.

While it is important not to encourage indiscriminate disobedience in children, there are times when we need to speak up even though it may get us in trouble or even make us unpopular with those in authority. Children avoid telling adults about incidents of bullying for several reasons. They are afraid the bully will find out they've told and they'll be in further trouble; they think adults can't help to resolve the issue; they think it is news adults do not want to hear.

It's important for children to hear that followers of Jesus speak the truth even though it makes them unpopular. It takes someone who is strong and heroic to follow God's way when our peers choose another way and when it doesn't seem as if the authorities can be helpful.

Consider creating a Reader's Theatre (no memorization) for the Acts text. At least two characters are needed: the high priest or religious authority, and Peter. Other disciples, arresting officers, and members of the council could be added if more participants are desired.

(Peter stands before the high priest.)

High Priest: *(in a condescending and authoritarian voice)* We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to blame us for Jesus' death.

Peter: *(in a brave and assured voice)* We must obey God rather than any human authority. God has honoured Jesus. God has given Jesus the responsibility to offer new life and forgiveness to those who need it. And we are witnesses to these things, as is the Holy Spirit God has given to those who obey him. We will continue to teach and speak of Jesus' loving ways.

April 22, 2007 (Third Sunday in Easter)

The story of Paul's conversion (Acts 9:1–6, 7–20) is the story of a bully who changed his ways because of an encounter with Jesus and received forgiveness. If someone like Paul can change and receive God's forgiveness, anyone can.

Children who are bullies or bystanders, or are often in trouble, can find hope in this story. The gospel text (John 21:1–19) also emphasizes that forgiveness can come even when we've done something wrong. Peter denies knowing Jesus three times, but Jesus doesn't give up on him or his ability to care for others.

Both these stories lend themselves to a dramatic interpretation.

Be sure to include a prayer of confession and words of forgiveness in today's service. Confess times when harmful words, painful actions, and denial of friendship have occurred. The congregation can respond to each petition with "God hear us and help us experience your surprising forgiveness."

May 13, 2007 (Sixth Sunday of Easter)

In today's gospel text (John 14:23–29), Jesus once again reassures the confused and troubled disciples with the promise of peace. Children need to hear again and again that God wants us to experience peace.

Adapt the following script for use in Children's Time:

Have you ever heard the word "sanctuary"? In a church, the sanctuary is the area closest to the altar or communion table. In some churches, the sanctuary is the area enclosed by the communion rail. Some churches don't have communion rails and the

sanctuary is a raised space. (*Indicate where your sanctuary is.*) Sometimes we talk about the whole room we worship in as the sanctuary. We usually think of the sanctuary as a holy place where we can meet God.

Sanctuary also means a safe place—a place to go to when you're in trouble. A church can *have* a sanctuary and it can *be* a sanctuary. It can be a holy place to meet God and a safe place in which to talk and learn about troubling matters.

In today's Bible story we hear Jesus say to his friends, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.... Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid" (John 14:27). Jesus wants us to live in peace and not be afraid in our schools, homes, communities, churches, or any other part of our lives.

If you ever need a safe place to come to or to talk to someone who will listen to you and help you in frightening times, remember that we're safe here. We all need to work together to make this a place where we can talk about anything and know that God is with us.



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