

I'm Special

Submitted by Heather Macnab, Camp Shagabec, Saskatchewan

Introduction

This package includes the Bible study discussion time for a five-day camp. It's intended to be used in small groups. We used this program for 12- and 13-year-olds divided into groups of about eight or nine campers. The program reads something like a script, with background notes for the counsellor in italics.

The fourth day of this program, "My camp is special," will need extensive revisions to be suitable for your own camp, but I think the exercise of creating that would be a good one! I've included what we used, even though it won't be appropriate for you, just to give you an idea of where I was going with it.

Read the day-by-day details below ahead of time, or you'll really be sorry! There is probably more material for each day than you'll have time for, so pick and choose what you most want to use. If the opportunity for a deeper discussion comes up, take it.

The important thing is that you value each person, you build a strong feeling of belonging for every single person in your group, and you make everyone feel special. It's also somewhat important that what you say and do reflects The United Church of Canada. Basically, the United Church wants to say this: "God loves you."

We tried to have other camp activities that revolve around this special theme:

- Campfire: Counsellors tell stories about how they're special. Take turns with counsellors telling three stories each: two stories true and one story false. The campers vote on which story they think is false.
- Spruce Krew: This is a provincial park program, where the park staff come and make use of our manpower on some project that benefits the park.
- A Nature Scavenger Hunt
- The 15-second "I'm Special" Talent Show: Campers have a very brief time to display something that makes them special. It can include such talents as ear-wiggling and opera singing.

Monday: My group is special

(Today is a day where kids are only just starting to get to know one another. Some of them might have been at camp together since Pee-Wee camp, but others are new and shouldn't be made to feel left out. It's good to think that everyone is at the same starting place.)

Introductory Activity

We need to start today by getting to know one another a bit. Very first of all, we need to learn names, so let's do this in a circle. The first person says their name, the second person says, "This is _____, and I'm _____," and so on, until the last person has to say all the names in a circle.

(It wouldn't hurt to change places and do this again. It's really important to know their names!)

We'll take a minute to think first, then each of us will have 20 seconds to say as many things about ourselves as we can think of.

(Do this. Make sure you participate too.)

Discussion Time

This week we have a fabulous theme: "I'm Special." What does "special" mean?

(Unique, different, important, valuable, better than others, stupid or a slow learner...don't offer this last one! Someone might say it because at school they have "special" education. To some people, "special" might be an insult, so make sure you're all thinking of it as a good thing.)

I want each of you to think of a few things (*pause and allow discussion after each of these*): a thing that is special to you, a place that is special to you, a person who is special to you, a time of year that is special to you, an activity that is special to you, something about you that makes you special.

(The counsellor always takes part in these things. You can't expect kids to talk about themselves if you won't. On the other hand, don't try to get too deep—your job, this early in the week, is to make this easy for them. Don't talk too much. If someone really has trouble answering, ask if they want you to come back to them later, or give them some vague suggestions so it's still their own ideas, not yours.)

Now that you've all had a chance to think about these things, let's tell each other. Each person in the circle, tell us what thing is special to you.

(Go through each of the questions above. Remember that a counsellor is not judgmental. Don't indicate that any of their "special" things sound stupid or unimportant!)

We're going to be a group this week, and our group is special. What makes our group special?

(Please don't tell them they are special because they have the best counsellor. This isn't a contest, and it's not about you—it's about them!)

Some of the things that make our group special are the special qualities about each person.

(We're special because all of us like volleyball, we're special because we're all 12 years old! Our group is special because between us all we have this huge collection of abilities...each of us is different.)

Maybe our group is special because altogether we have had 147 years of life experience! 38 parents including steps! 23 siblings! 17 dogs and 23 cats! etc.

Everyone, of course, has a beautiful wooden name tag. Maybe you could do something on the back of the name tag to show that you are all one group. Each person could sign everyone else's nametag, or you could decorate all the name tags in a similar way. This could be turned into a ritual: sign the nametag and say, "_____, I'm glad you're in my group. I hope we'll become friends this week." Don't use washable markers—use pens or permanent markers.)

Story Time

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12–27.

(Someone will want to read. Don't ever force everyone to take turns reading—this isn't school. Those who choose to read should read; everyone else should listen.)

What are they talking about here? What point are they trying to make? Why did Heather choose that we should read this particular passage today? In fact, why do we read the Bible at all?

(We read the Bible because this is a church camp, for one thing, but more importantly because the Bible has stuff in it that we can learn from—stuff about life. Like this passage—what's the point? The point is that sometimes we can have amazing talents and skills, but for some reason we think we're less than special because we don't have the skill someone else has. "If the whole body were just an eye, how would it hear?" Our group is important because of all the very different people in it. The group would be less special if everyone was the same. Make the kids figure it out—read it over again if they can't figure it out.)

Do you know what a clique is? *(It's when some kids form a group.)* Why do we usually think of a clique as a bad thing— isn't it kind of nice to hang out with kids and feel like a part of it? *(When we think of a clique in a bad way it's usually because the clique isn't about including people; it's about excluding people. Usually a clique ignores this "parts of the body" message and only values people who are the same. That can be hard on the kids who are different but, of course, still special!)*

Here at camp, we really try hard not to be cliquy. This is a place where everyone should feel included, whether they happen to be an arm, a leg, an ear, or an eye. I hope that we'll remember all week to accept one another and to let everyone be a valuable part of the group.

(Sometimes groups have a closing ritual. If you want to make one up, do, and do it each day.)

Tuesday: Nature is special

Activities

(In the Cypress Hills, we have a huge abundance of lodgepole pine trees. They're important to us because that's what makes the Cypress Hills different from other prairie forests. If you can't use pine cones for this exercise, use something that is a part of nature at your camp.)

This week we're talking about being special. Today we want to talk a bit about why nature is special. For a starter today, I have this dish of pine cones. Describe pine cones to me. What are they like?

(They're round, they're pointy on one end, they're all about the same size, they have seeds inside them, etc.)

I'd like each of you to shut your eyes and choose a pine cone out of the dish. Don't open your eyes for a while—I want you to spend some time feeling your pine cone and getting to know what it feels like. As you hold it, imagine what it looks like.

(Wait for a minute. Do the exercise yourself so you can judge how much time to give.)

Now open your eyes and look at your pine cone. Notice every single thing about it so that if you found it in a crowd, you could pick it out.

Throw your pine cone back into the dish now. I'm going to stir them up, then give you a chance to pick out your own.

(If you like, try having them choose their pine cone with their eyes shut. Or, with their eyes open.)

Discussion

Now that we've all found our pine cones again, what did we learn about nature just now?

(Everything is unique. Even things that look all look exactly alike are individuals.)

What might we have learned about people?

(Sometimes we think we know someone by a quick glance. As we get to know them we realize they are nothing like all those people we had lumped them together with—they are one of a kind.)

(It might be fun to drill a hole in the pine cone and make it into a necklace or tie it onto everyone's nametags. That would be a reminder that the camper, like the pine cone, is unique and special.)

Another Activity

Here's another exercise that's fun. Get into pairs. *(You might have to take part if you have an odd number.)* One person in each pair wears a blindfold. *(We use pillowcases for this—just put them over the kids' heads—and wash them after.)* Their partner thoughtfully and gently leads them to a tree in a slightly roundabout way so they don't know which way they

went. Give the blindfolded person a few minutes to really get to know that tree. Then bring the person back to the group, give them a few turns, and let them take off the blindfold.

Now we'll see if those people can pick out their trees. Then switch so the other partner has a chance.

Discussion Time

Are we a part of nature? Sometimes we live in such an artificial world that we can forget that. Even in this high-tech world, everything goes back to the earth. Choose anything in the room, and trace it back to the earth.

(My shoes are plastic. Plastic is made from fossil fuels. Fossil fuels are made from dinosaurs. Dinosaurs ate plants. Plants grew in the earth. This paper is made from wood, which is from trees, which grew in the earth. My hair is made from skin, which grows on me. The energy I use comes from food, that food comes from cows, cows eat grass, grass grows in the earth, etc.)

How do our activities affect nature? *(Most of our electricity in Saskatchewan comes from coal-fired generators. The people who live near them live with the effects of coal burning, and all of us live with the effects of global warming and acid rain that come from them. How often do you waste electricity?)* What's the difference between using resources and wasting resources? *(Basically, we are a species. We deserve space on the earth to live and eat, but do we deserve to have all that we waste? Are we taking more space than other species?)*

Activity

Let's do another exercise. Each of you becomes a different part of nature now. *(Assign the kids these roles: trees, bugs, worms, bunnies, hawks, etc. Use whatever species are common in your area.)*

Now I'm going to use this ball of yarn to show how we're all connected. As you toss the ball to someone, let out enough yarn to stretch across the circle, and explain how you're connected to that organism. It might be something you eat, something that eats you, something that shares your habitat, and so on.

(This should make a beautifully complicated web. Make sure everyone's included, and include yourself. Most people will be included several times.)

Now I'm going to do something. Let's suppose I spray for mosquitoes. If you're a mosquito, pull on the yarn to show that you've had some stress. Who feels that? No kidding. Let's clear-cut the trees from here now. Pull on the yarn if you're a tree. Now, if you're feeling that pull, you pull too.

Is anyone not feeling the effect of that action? *(Probably not.)*

There are a lot of lessons to learn from nature. That's why a great deal of wisdom has been handed down from the elders of people who live close to nature—because we are all a part of it.

Story Time

Everyone just relax and listen to this quote from Chief Seattle:

Please credit the source. Thank you!

"I'm Special" by Heather Macnab. Downloaded from www.united-church.ca/exploring/camping.

(See "Teach Your Children," page 10 of Earth Prayers from Around the World: 365 Prayers, Poems, and Invocations for Honoring the Earth, edited by Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon (Harper San Francisco), or choose another quote.)

Everything is connected, everything is unique. Thanks be to God.

Tree Time

Now I want each person to go back to that tree they found. We're going to have a little tree-time—a chance for each of us just to relax and think by ourselves. Don't look at each other. It doesn't matter if you doze off or if you think of something different, but if you want to, while you sit near your tree you can reflect on all the things you are related to, of how you connect to the web, and how that makes you special.

Wednesday: Variety is special

All-Day Activity

Our group needs to develop a peculiarity that will make us different from everyone else. Maybe we wear ties, or don't talk, or wear our clothes backwards, or speak pig Latin...

Opening Activity

We're going to start off today with a little game called "I'm different—me too."

(To facilitate this process, the kids have to have their name tags. The counsellor needs enough different stickers for each person in the group. This doesn't have to be really deep, but it can be.)

We're going to go around the circle, and each one of us will start a sentence with, "I'm the only person here who..." If you can say "me too" to what they say, it's your turn. If no one can say "me too," then you get a sticker on your name tag!

(Just proceed clockwise if this doesn't work. Eventually you will have found something unique about every person, and every person will have a sticker on their name tag. Some may have trouble, so give vague suggestions. Eventually you can resort to "I've never been to Manitoba," "My mom's name is Vicky," etc. Try to get the kids to do it themselves without too much help from you!)

Introductory Discussion

Today we're talking about how variety is special. A lot of time in the real world, it seems like we don't appreciate variety! What kinds of people are discriminated against? Have you ever been discriminated against? How?

Our lives are very affected by the media—TV and movies and music videos. According to them, what should we all be like?

(Girls should be skinny and wear skimpy clothing. Boys should be solid hunks of muscle with blonde hair and deep tans. No one should be handicapped in any way. Everyone should preferably be white, but it's okay to be black if you can sing. Other races are less acceptable...)

What's wrong with the media vision? What damage does it cause?

Do you know what the word "prejudice" means? Literally, it means to pre-judge. That means you judge someone before you get to know them. How about the word "stereotype"? This is a lot like pre-judging. It's like saying, "I saw a stupid blonde once, and you're blonde, so you must be stupid," or "I saw a First Nations person once who was lazy, so I think all First Nations people are lazy."

When it comes to the Bible, it's tricky to pick out a part about racism, since many times in biblical history racism seemed okay. For example, in the story where Moses leads the Jewish people out of slavery in Egypt, we're all saying rah rah for the Jewish folks because they escape across the Red Sea, and then...

(Read Exodus 14:26–29.)

So what is the writer's attitude toward Egyptians? Didn't God make Egyptians too? Of course God did. That's the confusing thing about war—both sides are praying to win. What's up with that? The Hebrew scriptures are full of stories about wars and struggles.

Then along came Jesus. Jesus was a bit of a radical, and he broke a lot of rules. Society in general at that time had lots and lots of rules, and Jesus said, no, God loves you anyway. God's love isn't just for the "chosen people" but is for everyone.

Story Time

This Bible story we're about to read took place after Jesus' death. The main guy in the story is Simon Peter. He had been a disciple of Jesus, and after Jesus' death he went all over the place telling people about Jesus and beginning the Christian church. You need to understand that the Jewish folks at that time were very fussy about what they ate—things had to be killed in just the right way, and some animals were never okay to eat. That's why he refers to some foods as being "ritually unclean."

(This is a long story. Maybe have the kids lie down and close their eyes to listen, or have them recap the story as you go along.)

(Read Acts 10:9–35.)

What is this story telling us? What did Peter suddenly realize? Why was this such a big thing for him to figure out?

(In the time that Peter lived, there was confusion about whether Jesus' message of God's love was for everyone or just for Jewish people. This experience made it perfectly clear to Peter that Jesus truly meant for ALL the people to know of God's love. Before you leave this story time, make sure everybody gets the point. It isn't okay to exclude people because they're different. It isn't okay to hate people who aren't of your race, background, or economic status. Jesus really meant everybody.)

Tree Time

It's time for us to go find our tree again and sit for a few minutes quietly. You can think about how diversity is special, or you can remember the theme—you are special. I'm special because of where I've been, where I am, and where I'm going. Where is that for you?

Thursday: Our camp is special

Introductory Discussion

(I was going to just leave this out because obviously you have to rewrite this part to suit your camp. I decided to leave it in to get you thinking about what's special about your own area, camp history, natural history, etc.)

This week we've been talking about things that are special. Something that is special to a lot of people is Camp Shagabec.

What is it about this place that makes it so special? Look around you: a bunch of run-down old buildings, no budget for anything, no trampoline, no canoeing program, no paid counsellors. What's so special about here?

(Take some time to let them think about this. Some won't be ready for anything too profound, while others are. Some answers I've heard to this question: at camp everyone is okay—there isn't a group you have to belong to, you're accepted the way you are, I feel close to God here, it's fun...)

This camp actually belongs to The United Church of Canada. How is it like a church here? How is it different?

There is a Healing Lodge for federally sentenced Aboriginal women in the Cypress Hills. *(Several miles from here.)* Why did they choose the Cypress Hills from all of Canada as a location for the special prison that would be a place of healing?

(Long before European people arrived here, the inhabitants believed the Cypress Hills were a special, holy, sacred place.)

Story Time

We're going to look briefly at three different dudes in the Bible.

(Read Exodus 19:1–3; 1 Kings 19:11–12; Mark 9:2–7.)

What did all three of these guys have in common? Where did they all go? Who talked to them there?

A very long time ago, when people were writing the Bible, they believed that the earth was flat, the sky was a dome over the earth, and God was in heaven just above that. We kind of know better than that now. Nevertheless, these early writings reflect that understanding of the earth. So maybe that's why they felt closer to God in high places. Churches are built with tall steeples that reach for the sky. Many biblical characters had their God-encounters on mountaintops. Moses climbed Mount Sinai to see God in the burning bush and get the commandments. Elijah climbed a mountain to hear God in the soft whisper of a voice. Jesus climbed a mountain to have his transfiguration experience, when God said, "This is my own dear son."

I know the earth isn't flat and I know the sky is not a dome over the earth but rather a vast space that goes on forever. I don't think God is an old man on a throne just on the other side of the clouds. Yet, somehow, this high place we're at does seem to be closer to God. I believe the First People were correct in thinking the Cypress Hills is a spiritual place.

Surely it isn't the altitude that makes Camp Shagabec special?

Because of these three biblical examples we sometimes use the expression "mountaintop experience" to describe what it feels like when something really wonderful happens—when we encounter God, even. Sometimes camp feels like a mountaintop experience, maybe because we're so high up, but maybe because of the special place this is when we're here with a group. When have you had a "mountaintop experience"?

(It doesn't have to be a time when God spoke to them. It can be a time when they saw something more clearly, suddenly understood something, or just felt really special: a special ceremony, winning a ball game, being with special friends, etc. We're looking for natural "highs.")

Tree Time

Today you can spend your tree time thinking about this wonderful place and how special it is, or remember—you are special! What are some of the things you've achieved, and how do they make you special?

Friday: YOU are special

This is our last time to be together as a group. We've talked this week about how the group is special, nature is special, variety is special, and our camp is special. The most important thing, through all of this, is that each one of us is special. That's what I want you to remember as you go home from here—you're special.

Story Time

When Jesus wanted to make a point, he usually told a story. That's part of the Jewish tradition. Jesus told three stories that we're going to look at now.

(Read Luke 15:1–7, 8–10, 11–24.)

The last story is called "The Prodigal Son." Do you know what "prodigal" means? Me neither!

Activity

(Act out "The Prodigal Son" as if it happened today. Change whatever you want, but keep the main point. You could read out loud while the kids pantomime the action, or let them change the roles any way they like. Try to have them portray the emotions of the people involved: the greedy son, the angry son, the sorry son, the frantic father.)

"So there's this guy with two sons. One son works hard and helps his dad on the farm. The other son says, "Instead of farming with you, dad, give me the cash that would be the value of half this place." The dad (duh) gives him the money. He goes off to the city, spends the money stupidly, and finally realizes he'll starve, so he needs to go back to dad...")

How would your brother react if you were the prodigal?

Obviously Jesus was trying to make an important point, since he told three stories to do it! What was Jesus' point in these stories—what was he trying to say?

(Every single sheep is important! God doesn't think, "Ah, I've got lots of people looked after, so this one doesn't matter." God values every single one of us, just as the shepherd cares about every single sheep, the woman cares about every single coin, and the father cares about every single child.)

The son in that last story behaved very badly. Describe his behaviour for me. (*selfish, stupid, wasteful, unfair*) Yet the father forgives it all. The father was waiting for him to come back and was missing him.

Jesus told this story to tell us what God is like. God is like that father, ready to forgive us, ready to welcome us home. This is particularly important at those times when maybe you feel like nobody cares about you. God always cares. Even if you forget God, God doesn't forget you.

So the point of the story? You're special!

Tree Time

We're not done yet! But we're going to have some tree time in the middle today. Think about all the people in your life who have made you who you are. Most of the people we

meet have some kind of influence on how we turn out. Spend some time thinking about the people who have moulded you, helped create you, and formed your opinions and other qualities. We'll come back together in about five minutes.

Discussion Time

Camp is a really intense time, and when we're here we sort of forget about the rest of the world. Tomorrow, we go back to the real world (or the artificial world, if you believe camp is the real world!). Who will be waiting for you to come home tomorrow? What are they doing right now that you're missing? What are you going to do as soon as you get home?

You're special for a lot of reasons. One of them is that we're special to the people who love us. Most of us have some people who love us, right? Who are they?

If you ever feel like nobody at all loves you, remember the story. That poor guy was eating the pigs' leftovers thinking nobody loved him, when all the time his dad was staring up the road wishing he'd show up. You matter more than you might think. And besides, God is always, always looking up the road for you, ready to welcome you home.

Closing Activity

We've had time this week to get to know each other. Today we're going to pass those name tags around one more time and put a word on the name tag that says why that person is special. First we're going to spend a good five minutes just sitting here thinking about what makes each person special.

(Maybe you need to remind people one more time that they have to say nice things. These name tags are getting a bit crowded, so write small!

End off this time together any way you feel comfortable, but do it nicely. Here's an idea: Stand in a circle and say, "Bob, you are..."—read the traits off the name tag—you are special, and you are a child of God.

Amen.)