

GRADES 4 - 6
SESSION 2: ME IN FAITH COMMUNITY, FAITH COMMUNITY IN ME

INTRODUCTION

It matters what we believe.

*Some beliefs are expansive
and lead the way to wider and deeper sympathies.*

*Some beliefs are like the sunshine,
blessing children with the warmth of happiness;
some beliefs are bonds in a universal brotherhood,
where sincere differences beautify the pattern;*

*some beliefs are gateways
opening up wide vistas for exploration.*

*Some beliefs nurture self-confidence and
enrich feelings of personal worth;
some beliefs are pliable like the young sapling,
ever growing with the upward thrust of life.*

It is important what we believe.

*And what a child believes is also a serious matter — not a subject for jest or sentimentality. —
Sophia Lyon Fahs*

Children, though natural questioners, are not skeptics, for whom doubt is an end in itself. Children are as open to belief and faith as they are to questioning. They are looking, as we are all looking, for things on which they can depend, values they can faithfully live by, ideas that make sense, things to believe in. — Rev. Earl Holt in Religious Education at Home

In our Unitarian Universalist congregations, we attend to our beliefs and values by coming together. We support one another and look to our shared Principles to guide us in making just, ethical choices about how to live and how to treat others. When parents bring their children to our congregations and religious education programs, they know that rather than a specific set of beliefs, children will gain tools to help them pay attention to what they believe. They know their children will be encouraged to articulate their beliefs and values, and be guided to translate their beliefs and values into attitudes and real-life actions.

Many children come to church without complaint; many enjoy coming. This session helps all children understand why it matters that they come to church. They ask a mirror question: "How does my coming to church help me live and grow?" and a window question, "How does coming to church help me see the world, and my place in it?"

The Faith in Action activity provides an opportunity to extend the story's direct teaching—feed your enemies—and reinforce that your congregation is a place where lessons like this are learned. You may like to split this session across two meeting times to ensure the Faith in Action is included.

SESSION PLAN

MATERIALS

- Chalice set up on a mirror (to represent the idea of light, reflection and mirrors).
- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- Bell, chime or other sound instrument
- Poster board for all participants - base of window
- 11x14 paper picture frames - frame of window
- Window supplies
 - Aluminum foil or other reflective papers
 - Sheets of plain or construction paper
 - Color markers (permanent markers work best on foil)
 - Glue sticks, tape (including double-sided tape), and scissors (including left-hand scissors)

OPENING

If you want, use a bell to signal that it is time for the lesson. You or your child(ren) may light the chalice, and begin centering yourselves.

ACTIVITY: STARTING OUR WINDOW/MIRROR PANELS (20 MINUTES)

Explain that each person brings a unique self to the world. Each person may be drawn to different ideas, may have different skills, likes and dislikes, and ways of doing things. To represent their uniqueness, each participant will work on their own panel during the Windows and Mirrors program.

Tell participants:

As you work on your panel, it can be a mirror where you see yourself as you are in this program, and how your experiences and thoughts here reflect you or affect you.

When we display our panels together, they can be a window for others to look in and observe each of you and the group. They may be able to see and understand how you see yourselves. Others may find a mirror for themselves in your panels, too.

Hold up a sample panel. Describe your plan for how and where the panels will be displayed together at the end of the program. Tell the child(ren):

This is one way for the congregation to get a window into what you have been doing and learning. The panel will be a way to share with the whole church community. When we display our panels together, the exhibit might help some viewers see our congregation in a new way.

Invite the child(ren) to take a Window/Mirror Panel and write their names on the back with permanent marker. Show them where you will store their panels between sessions. If you have not glued on the frames, help children do this now.

Have them begin making the reflective frame. Give your child a picture frame to cover in reflective material. Cut long, 3- to 4-inch strips of aluminum foil. Paste strips to make a frame for each panel, using strong adhesive or double-sided tape to stick your frame onto the board securely.

Next have them decorate the frames: Suggest they recall their Outer/Inner Self-Portrait from Session 1. Invite them to consider using the ideas from that activity to help decorate the frame. You might say:

- Consider who you are in the world. You might include some "outer" features, such as your physical appearance, your interests and skills, the places you spend your time.
- You might also express your "inner" self, including some aspects of your personality, some of your feelings, some wishes or fears.

Invite them to use the permanent markers and other materials to write or draw along the reflective frame of their panel to represent at least ten things they think make up who they are. Suggest they could cut shapes from the pieces of reflective material and then use adhesive to attach them where they wish along the outer frame. If they need help, assist them. If children are using permanent markers, make sure the ink is dry before they glue the pieces onto their frames.

Keep your instructions brief. Explain that they have a short time to work now, but will add to the panels later today and in future sessions.

ACTIVITY: STORY — JELLY BEANS -- SMALL GROUP or FAMILY ACTIVITY

Before you begin, ring the chime or other noisemaker. Make eye contact with each participant. Read or tell the story. Sound the chime again at the end.

WINDOWS AND MIRRORS: SESSION 2: STORY: JELLY BEANS

By Isabel Champ Wolseley. From Lighting Candles in the Dark: Stories of Courage and Love in Action (Philadelphia : Friends General Conference, 2001). Used by permission.

A family had all heard a story recently in church that included a verse from the bible that read, "If your enemy is hungry, feed them." It was a confusing idea—be nice to your enemies, treat evil with good. And it seemed a really hard thing to do.

The children who were seven and ten were especially puzzled. "Why feed your enemy?" they wondered.

The parents wondered too.

Day after day, John Jr. came home from school complaining about a classmate who sat behind him in fourth grade. "Bob keeps jabbing me when Mrs. Bailey isn't looking. One

of these days when we're out of the playground, I am going to jab him right back—at least."

His parents weren't too happy either, thinking that Bob was really a brat! Besides, they thought the teacher should be doing a better job with kids in the class. The parents sat at the table wondering what they were going to do when John's seven-year-old sister, Amelia, spoke up: "Maybe he should feed Bob."

Everyone stopped eating and stared, with John Jr. asking, "Because he is my enemy?" His sister nodded.

We all looked at each other quickly, clearly uncomfortable with thinking of Bob as an enemy. It didn't seem as if an enemy could be in the fourth grade. An enemy was someone far off in another country, a grown-up.

John looked at us and asked, "What do you think?"

"Well," his parents said, "God said it, so maybe you should try it. Do you know what Bob likes to eat? If you are going to feed him, you may as well feed him something he likes." Amelia asked, "Does he like goldfish?" which was her favorite snack.

No.

"How about cookies?" his mother who loved to bake asked.

"Maybe, but he can get cookies anywhere," John answered.

Everyone was quiet.

Especially John.

"Jelly beans!" he shouted. "Bob just loves jelly beans."

So John bought a bag of jelly beans to take to school. We would see whether or not enemy feeding worked.

The next day, sure enough Bob jabbed John in the back. John turned around and slapped the bag of jelly beans on his enemy's desk.

When the bus dropped John off at home, his mom was waiting for him. He got off the bus yelling, "It worked, it worked!"

"After he jabbed me, I gave him the jelly beans. He was so surprised he didn't say anything—he just took them. But he didn't jab me the rest of the day."

Or the next day. Or the next. In fact, John became good friends with Bob, all because of a little bag of jelly beans. John also realized that Bob was never really his enemy. He was just someone John didn't know. He was just someone who needed John to show him friendship.

Maybe people whom we think of as enemies are just hungry; maybe not for food, but for acts of kindness. Maybe. I think so. What do you think?

Invite the child(ren) to think about the story silently for a few moments.

Say:

Now we are going to practice listening and discussing skills. As we find out what one another thought about the story, both skills are needed to understand the story better from the multiple perspectives in the room.

Ask everyone to use "I think" or "I feel" statements. Remind them not to assume others think or feel the same way. You may suggest that a brief silence follow each person's comment.

Invite the child(ren) to retell the story briefly. What children recall and relay tells you what they found most meaningful or memorable. Then use these questions to facilitate discussion.

- Have you ever been like John in this story—bothered by someone who is mean to you?
- What have you done when "your Bob" has bothered you?
- Has it worked?
- Have you ever behaved like Bob? Bothered someone else?
- How would you describe an enemy?
- What does "feed your enemy" mean? (Affirm answers like "being kind to someone even if they are mean to you," "thinking about what someone needs, even if they are being mean," and "being nice to someone who is against you or being mean.")
- Why might this work?
- How did it work in this story?
- How do you think Bob felt when John was nice to him?
- Why might you not want to try it?
- What else, besides feeding, might work as an act of kindness?
- Where did John hear the story of "feeding your enemies"? (Point out that the story came from religious education and was shared at home among the family.) What is special about this kind of story, the kind of story you hear at church?

Share one or two sentences articulating what this story teaches about being at church and how it helps us and others (re)make the world. Ask:

- Can you think of any other stories from church that have helped you solve a problem? (If so, ask the children to expand on which stories and what problem. Don't be surprised if no one volunteers. Be ready to volunteer your own example.)
- Besides bullies and enemies, what other kinds of problems might be good to learn about here? Can you think of stories or ideas we can talk about at church that might make your life more peaceful, more useful, or happier?

Thank the child(ren) for their thoughts and ideas, then extinguish the chalice.

For later...

EXPLORE THE TOPIC TOGETHER. Talk about...

Ask your child(ren) what they found most meaningful about church today—having this conversation directly after church tends to yield the most information. They may share something that happened outside of the religious education program. That is appropriate. Ask them what they have liked the best during your family's relationship with this congregation, or what they remember most.

Share what prompted your initial attendance and why you are part of our congregation now. Share something your child may not know about your childhood religious upbringing and how it affects the choices you make for them. Explain in a meaningful way why it is important to you that your child attend church with you. Using the phrase "church matters" in the conversation might surprise them.

EXTEND THE TOPIC TOGETHER . Try...

Create a "seven cents a day" bank for each family member. Place banks where coins are likely to be discovered and added to the bank—grandparents and cousins are not to be excluded! Search the congregational newsletter for other social justice efforts if your church is not involved with hunger work. On the Unitarian Universalist website, research projects that help alleviate poverty and hunger. Talk about where else in your daily lives issues of hunger or poverty arise and where else are you called to attend to them? How does church or religious education attendance connect to your family's response to hunger or poverty locally or in the larger world?

As a family, choose an organization to receive the money you will collect over time.

A FAMILY RITUAL

Develop a Sunday-after-church or Sunday-before-church ritual. Choose one small activity or food treat that your family can include into Sunday morning churchgoing. It is vital that your child (not just you) perceive this as a treat. Involve your child in developing the ritual. Consider realistic timing—before church or after—especially if the ritual involves a stop for food.

Consider the seasonal activities that happen on Sunday, such as sports, that might interfere with the ritual. Some suggestions:

- A trip to a bakery or doughnut shop
- Hot chocolate with whipped cream every Sunday morning
- Riding bicycles or scooters to church
- A stop at a playground or library after church
- Breakfast or lunch at a special place
- Donating non-perishable food to a shelter that has Sunday drop-off times
- Buying flowers for home or for a neighbor
- Singing special funny songs in the car
- Looking for a specific person at church
- Playing after church with a friend you know only from church.