

Getting rid of stumbling blocks — Weekly Christian ed lesson

Adapted from an article by **JOELLE BRUMMIT-YALE** in
the **Presbyterian Outlook**



Scripture: Mark 9:38-50

It's football season, which means it's also marching band season! One of the teens in our church youth group has joined his school's marching band. He tells me the band is off to a great start. The football team... not so much. Every week the band plays its heart out while the football team struggles on the field. This last week the team finally began scoring points and managed to pull off its first victory! While the football players likely attribute the win to their developing skills, I can't help but feel like the steady, positive presence of the marching band must have buoyed the team. We all benefit from support and encouragement more than criticism and reprimand, especially when we are doing our best. Jesus recognized this was as important for our faith development as it is in other areas of our lives. In

today's lesson, children will see how Jesus calls us to encourage rather than criticize the ways others express their faith.

Introduce

Begin the time with your group of children by asking them to think of a time when they were learning how to do something they had never done before. Encourage them to reflect on that experience.

- What did it feel like? Were they nervous, excited, etc.?
- Then ask them to recount what happened that helped them develop that skill. Did someone else help them? What did that person do that encouraged them to continue trying? Did anything happen that discouraged them? If so, what?
- Note that when we are encouraged and supported in learning something new, we often enjoy it more and are better able to learn. When we are criticized, scolded or told we aren't capable, more often than not, we give up or feel discouraged.

Prepare

Set the context for the Scripture reading. Share with the children that today's passage directly follows last week's lesson — where we learned about Jesus responding to the disciples' argument about who has the most power in society. Jesus tells them that those who are willing to serve and those who are considered the least powerful (children) are the greatest in God's eyes. The lectionary reading for this week again shows the disciples thinking they know what is right. Jesus offers them a different view.

- Read aloud Mark 9:38-50. If you're reading with younger children, you may want to use The Message translation of the text, as it modernizes some of the more challenging language.
- Also note that the imagery in verses 43-50 can easily be misinterpreted by young children. Jesus speaks metaphorically about removing body parts that cause us to stumble in our faith. Some children may hear these words literally causing them to be frightened or believe that Jesus calls on us to harm ourselves.

After reading the passage, ask the children to recount the concern that the disciples share at the beginning of the text. Note that they are upset because they have noticed someone attempting to do the work that Jesus has done. Because this person is not one of Jesus' "inner circle," the disciples try to stop him.

- Have the children wonder about what they might do in a similar situation.
- Do they become concerned when someone who is not a member of their congregation does something in Christ's name?
- What about if someone who is not Christian does something that Christians typically do?

Wonder

Continue the discussion looking at Jesus' response to the disciples. Ask the children to share what Jesus says about the disciples intervening. Help them unpack the examples that Jesus gives.

- Note that Jesus uses some very strong – even shocking – images to make his point.
- He wants to be very clear that we are called to remove any barriers to the faith of others that we might be tempted to put in place. We should support one another as we express and develop our faith rather than pointing out what we see as the errors in their expression.
- Encourage the group to share similar experiences.
- When have they felt criticized for the way they have expressed their faith?
- When have they critiqued the way that others have shown their faith?
- Approach the conversation with care, noting that it's not uncommon for us to respond the way that the disciples did.

Explore

- Extend this conversation by providing the children with an opportunity to enact Jesus' words. Ask the children to think of ways they have recently seen others express their faith.
- Encourage them to not only list examples that fit with their own approach to faith but also those that are different than their personal style.
- You can limit the focus to just your congregation, or you can extend it to the larger community.
- Then have each child pick one example that is not part of her own faith practice. For instance, a child may mention that a friend goes to worship services several times a week while that child believes Sunday services are enough.
- The child would choose this example over one that is similar to their own practice.

Do

Next, provide each child with a blank sheet of paper or a blank greeting card, an envelope and something to write with.

- Ask the child to write a note to that person encouraging him in this expression of faith.
- Have each child sign her note and seal it in an envelope.
- Distribute these notes to the people that they are written to by delivering them by hand if you'll see them in person or by mailing them.

