Scripture
John 15:1-8

Abide and Obey

In and through Jesus we have life.

- Jesus calls himself the true vine and the bread of life.
- The emphasis of both of today's gospels is on the presence of Jesus with his friends.
- In today's session, children explore this central gospel image and continue their celebration of Easter.

Question of the Week
When do you feel close to Jesus? to God?

Core Session
- Getting Started
- Gospel Story: The Gardener and the Vine (plant or gardening tools)
- Story-Review Game (paper dolls, bag, blanket)
- Praying Together (white or colored cloths, Bible, candles)

Enrichment
- Discover the Good News
- Singing Together
- Free Play: Relationships (dolls or stuffed animals)
- Book Corner: Friendship
- Info: Leader Expectations
- Info: Young Children and the Gospel
- Info: Where You'll Find Everything Else

Helps for Catechists
- More about Today’s Scriptures
- Reflection
- The Scriptures and the Catechism
- Praying with Music
- The World of the Bible: Hellenists
☑ Getting Started (10-15 minutes)
Gather the children around you. Explain:
◆ We still celebrate Easter today.
◆ We celebrate because Jesus is alive. Jesus is risen.

Remind children of this simplified version of the traditional Easter Greeting:

Greeter: Alleluia! Jesus is risen.
Children: Jesus is risen. Alleluia!

Help children exchange the greeting with one another.

Then show children Malcah Zeldis’s painting A Peaceable Kingdom with Anna Pavlova attached to this document. This vibrant poster shows diverse figures gathered in a parklike setting.

Discuss:
◆ What are these friends doing?
◆ How do you think these friends feel today? Why?
◆ Who are our friends?
◆ What can we do with our friends?
◆ How do we feel when we are with our friends?

☑ Gospel Story (5-10 minutes)
The Gardener and the Vine
Story Focus: A real vine would make an ideal visual focus for today’s story. As an alternative you could show gardening tools to the children. Let children handle the tools and talk about how they are used before telling today’s story.

A gardener takes care of his vine. He gives the vine water and food. He helps the vine see the sun. He makes sure the vine has plenty of space to grow.

The vine grows strong. The vine has many branches with fresh green leaves. The vine can have bright flowers now and good fruit.

As the gardener takes care of the vine, so God takes care of us.

God helps us grow big and strong. God brings us together with many friends. God brings us very close to each other and to Jesus.

We can do so much with the help of our friends! We can do so much more with the help of Jesus!

God takes good care of us.

After the story
You can invite children to water the plant or you can make the gardening tools available for free play.

☑ Story-Review Game (5-15 minutes)
Friendship Match
Before the session cut out two paper dolls from each color, allowing one doll for each child. You will find a simple Doll Pattern attached to this document.

In the session put the paper dolls into a bag. Spread the blanket in the middle of the room.

Directions to the children:
◆ Draw a paper doll from the bag.
◆ Find a friend who has the same color doll that you do.
◆ With your friend, sit on the blanket.
◆ When all the children are sitting, help them gather into a group hug. Say:
◆ Thank you, God, for friends!

☑ Praying Together (5 minutes)
Gather children in the area used as a prayer corner throughout Lent. Invite the children to decorate the prayer corner for Easter. (Although the liturgical color for Easter is white, children are more likely to perceive an assortment of brightly colored cloths as festive.)

Help the children include an open Bible and candles in the prayer corner. Explain that during this time of the year—Easter time—we use in our prayer the word, *alleluia*, which means “Praise God!”

Encourage children to join you in calling out *alleluia* several times. Pray:
◆ Thank you, God, for giving Jesus new life. *Alleluia*
◆ Thank you, Jesus, for being our friend and for being with us today. *Alleluia*
◆ Thank you, God, for each friend here. *(Name each child. All respond with “alleluia” after each name.)*
◆ Thank you, God, for so many things... *(Encourage children to offer their own thanksgivings. Help children respond to each prayer by calling out alleluia!)*

Note: Distribute this week’s Discover the Good News to children before they leave, or e-mail it to their parents after the session.
Discover the Good News
(5-10 minutes)
In today’s Discover the Good News you’ll find a discussion starter about friends. Ask children:
◆ What do friends like to do together?

Children are also invited to imagine what they would like to do with their friend Jesus. Children can act out their answers or you can invite them to draw pictures of themselves with Jesus.

If you choose the drawing activity, set out paper and crayons. Explain:
◆ Jesus says he is always with us.
◆ Can you draw a picture of yourself with Jesus?

Invite volunteers to share their finished pictures.

Singing Together
(5-10 minutes)
From Singing the Good News you and the children can sing together:
◆ “Just Imagine” (p. 38 in the songbook)
◆ “God’s Alive” (p. 40 in the songbook; also available as an MP3)
◆ “Jesus Says to Us” (p. 46 of the songbook; also available as an MP3)

Note: To access both the songbook and its attached MP3 files, open your Spring-B Seasonal Resources folder, then click on Singing the Good News.

Free Play
(10-20 minutes)
Relationships
Children explore relationships during imaginative play.

Since today’s session focuses on relationships, make a center where children can experiment with imaginary relationships. Allow two or three children at a time to use the center.

Do not reinforce racist attitudes by providing only blond baby dolls for the children. Some churches provide a collection of dolls that model different ages, sexes, races and social roles, but this can be a costly option.

Another option is to provide a collection of stuffed toy animals instead of dolls. Many children’s book writers use animal protagonists for precisely this reason: animals are free of limiting racial and social characteristics.

A third option is to use simple handmade dolls, such as handkerchief dolls. You can find directions for making these dolls in the session for the 5th Sunday of Lent.

Book Corner
(10-15 minutes)
Friendship
We recommend one or more of the following children’s books on friendship to support today’s session:
◆ Frog and Toad are Friends by Arnold Lobel. (New York: Harper and Row, 1970). Frog and Toad are two of the most endearing friends to grace children’s literature. These are short, simple stories.
◆ Runaway Bunny by Margaret Wise Brown. (New York: Harper and Row, 1942). This beloved children’s book even draws on Jesus’ imagery from today’s gospel: the loving mother who will not lose her runaway son is compared to a gardener.
◆ A Weekend with Wendell by Kevin Henkes. (New York: Mulberry Books, 1995). In this hilarious story, energetic Wendell drives Sophie and her parents up the wall until Sophie finds a way to turn the tables on Wendell—and become his friend, too.

You might use floor cushions or carpet squares to set up a comfortable book corner. Read one or more books aloud to the children, taking time to show the pictures and to listen to comments and stories that the books inspire in the children.
Leader Expectations

In the Discover activities above, we suggest inviting children to draw pictures of themselves with Jesus. Some of the children will enjoy working with this concrete suggestion. Other children will want to work on their favorite drawing of the moment. Leaders can feel disappointment when planned activities produce disparate results. We need to realize that children are often much less concerned with our “themes” and more with their own needs and interests.

“But what are they learning?” asks one parent. When we give children permission to act on their own ideas, they are learning that religious education is an environment that welcomes them, just as they are today. There is no more important way to model to young children the most important lesson they need to learn about God: that God loves and welcomes them just as they are, now and always.

Young Children and the Gospel

In today’s gospel, Jesus uses the metaphor of a gardener and vine to assert the unity of God, Jesus and the Church.

We include Jesus’ images in our story, but the focus of our session for preschoolers and kindergartners is thankfulness for all the friends we have in Jesus.

Where You’ll Find Everything Else

◆ Attached to this Session Plan you will find:
  — Backgrounds and reflections for today’s readings, titled More about Today’s Scriptures.
  — An optional Mass Play activity.
  — A Doll Pattern for use in today’s Friendship Match activity.
  — Zeldis’s A Peaceable Kingdom with Anna Pavlova, to be used in today’s Getting Started.
  — This week’s At Home with the Good News, to distribute or email to group members after the session.

◆ Open your Spring-B Seasonal Resources folder, then click on Seasonal Articles to find:
  — Information on Spring-B’s Models of the Faith.
  — For catechists and/or families, an article titled The Gospel According to John.
  — For catechists and/or families, an article titled The Passover: Old and New.
More about Today Scriptures

Today’s readings reveal what it means to live in and through Jesus. Paul boldly witnesses to his new-found faith in Christ, while the Church experiences peaceful growth. The author of 1 John reveals that true faith becomes visible through the obedience of active love. Jesus explains that, like branches connected to a vine, we abide with him and experience great fruitfulness.

Acts 9:26-31
Luke tells of Saul’s experiences in the months following his conversion. Because of Saul’s earlier zealous and cruel persecution of the disciples, the believers suspected him of deception and entrapment. Barnabas, a member of the Christian community, trusted Saul’s conversion experience on the road to Damascus and introduced Saul to the leaders of the church in Jerusalem. Because of a plot on Saul’s life, the disciples sent Saul away where he would remain for several years until Barnabas again drew him into active ministry, this time to the Gentiles.

“John teaches how we live in Christ and Christ lives in us. Just as the trunk of the vine gives its natural properties to each of the branches, so, by bestowing the Holy Spirit, Christ gives Christians a certain kinship with himself.” —St. Cyril of Alexandria

In verse 31, Luke briefly reports on the steady growth of the Church, which enjoyed a respite from persecution since Saul had become a disciple of Jesus Christ.

1 John 3:18-24
This passage discusses the marks of the life of God’s children, the life of love. This love is the sign that Christians have passed from death to life because they embody what is God’s essential quality.

True love for one another is manifested in action, modeled upon the experience of Jesus’ love for us. It is shown forth as self-sacrifice, both at the heroic level and in the daily exercise of generosity. Deeds, not devout protestations or guilty feelings, reveal our true standing before God, who knows us better than we know ourselves.

Through Jesus we have “boldness before God” (v. 21). When our hearts are aligned with Jesus’ heart and we keep his commandments, God gives us what we need. The word translated boldness (Greek, parrásia) is related to the right of a Greek citizen to speak freely before the assembly. In God’s presence we can be bold and confident because we are assured of God’s love for us. Thus John joins together both faith and works, belief and obedience, union with God and love of others.

John 15:1-8
Chapter 15, the discourse on the vine and the branches, contains the last of the great “I am” discourses in the Gospel of John. These discourses parallel in function the synoptic gospels’ parables of the kingdom.

Jesus, as Son, the representative of Israel, is “the true vine” (v. 1) who fulfills the calling of Israel. The Father is the vinegrower who “prunes” (v. 2, “trims clean”) the branches. Jesus reassures the disciples that they are already “pruned” (v. 3, translated “cleansed” in the NRSV) by his word.

For John, Christian life is an active and committed life. There cannot be a living, unproductive branch. Those who do not remain, or abide, are taken away. Those who do abide through prayer bear fruit and show themselves as Jesus’ disciples.

Reflection
To stroll through a peach orchard in August reveals what Jesus describes in today’s gospel. The fragrance, the colors of sunset on the round globes, the sense of abundance, finally the taste: sweet juices oozing from mouth to elbows. It’s so sensual it’s not seemly in church—let alone the Bible!

Jesus has no delusions about our worth, even our best efforts: “apart from me you can do nothing” (15:5). Deep down, we suspect we need help; Jesus confirms that intuition. But he can make us as fruitful as Anne Porter describes in “Another Sarah”:

A wave of living sweetness
A nation of white petals
A dynasty of apples.

Or peaches. Hidden in the wonderful, organic vine-and-branches metaphor is a caution: don’t get detached from the vine. We can be so caught up in our charitable works, our marvelous endeavors or our efforts to save the world, we overlook the source of our energy. Since we are speaking metaphorically anyway, another poet (Denise Levertov) reminds us—the branches—how to stay connected with the vine:

A wave of living sweetness
A nation of white petals
A dynasty of apples.
The Scriptures and the Catechism

Today we recall that our discipleship is characterized by love. Love describes our attempt to respond fully to God with our life (CCC, #1812–13, 1822–29, 2093–94). Through being joined by baptism into the Christian community, we are bonded in love with Jesus and his life courses through us. Jesus is the vine; we are the branches that share his life. To share this life is what holiness is all about. As Christians we are called to holiness, which means living out our loving relationship with God (CCC, #825, 2012–16, 2028–29).

Praying with Music

Music is the connecting point to a thousand memories and emotions. We associate music with the places we have been, the times we have experienced and the people in our lives.

Music is all around us. There is no denying the effectiveness of music, so why not use it to affect our emotions and enhance our personal environment when we pray? Do we ever think about how music can help us to grow closer to God, or even if music can be a form of prayer?

Resonances in Our Soul

Music affects our whole person—mind and body, spirit and emotion. It moves us by going straight to our heart. When music and song come through our ears into our hearts, they set up a kind of vibration or resonance that can give us pleasure, set us on edge, calm our aching and anxious hearts, or set our toes to tapping. Music can touch people profoundly on levels that words alone cannot. So why not use music to shape our spirituality?

Let us make music the basis of our prayer by listening to it, singing along with it, using it as starting point for praise, thanks, lament, etc. as the ancient biblical authors did in the psalms. There is no question that it can help us to shape our environment effectively and can be changed to suit or influence the moods of our lives—sadness, joy, consolation, gratitude, celebration, etc.—through its beauty, harmony, shared community with others when we join our voices to theirs in song.

Instrumental Music

We need different types of music for various times and styles of prayer. Sometimes we need peaceful music just to sit and relax in the stillness of God’s presence and to help focus on Jesus and wait on him without getting distracted by all the things of this world. Worship music can help, but often there are so many words or catchy melodies that distract us when we are trying to be in God’s presence.

Hymns or Songs

Most sacred songs and hymns were not written to be background music but to be sung aloud with others. Sacred music is not just an addition that frames the liturgy and makes it more pleasing, but an important means of active participation in worship whether at home or at church.

The community dimension of singing is important because it connects the group into a unified, worshiping assembly—one voice lifted in song to the Lord. As you use music for your personal, household or small group prayer, let the music take you to the One to whom you are singing. Remember the words of St. Augustine, “One who sings, prays twice.”

The World of the Bible

Hellenists

Hellenists (derived from the Greek word for Greece, Hellas) were those persons from other nations who spoke Greek and were more receptive to the influence of Greek customs and culture.

Though the Romans ruled the Mediterranean nations, Greek literature and ideas formed the basis for education, and the Greek language was used for international communication and business. Thus to be educated often meant to be able to speak and read Greek (like St. Paul and the other New Testament authors who all wrote in Greek).

For Jews, Hellenism posed a threat because its education was rooted in religious beliefs and social values that were not compatible with the Jewish belief that Yahweh was the one and only God (monotheism).