Unexpected Fullness

Jesus tells us that true happiness runs contrary to ordinary expectations.

◆ The grace of God comes to each of us in surprising and unexpected ways.
◆ The delight that children find in surprises suggests that they recognize surprises as gifts from God.
◆ Our foregone conclusions about what God wants for us and from us may be surprisingly wrong.

Question of the Week
How does Jesus tell people to be happy? What surprises you in Jesus’ words?

Core Session
◆ Getting Started
◆ Gospel Story: Surprise!
◆ Surprise Snacks (graham crackers, peanut butter or cream cheese, various toppings)
◆ Praying Together

Enrichment
◆ Discover the Good News
◆ Singing Together
◆ Craft: String Paint (segments of string, craft paint)
◆ Art/Story: McGrath’s Prince of Peace
◆ Music: “Old MacDonald”
◆ Storytelling: Feelings Puppets (paper plates)
◆ Following Jesus Poster (stickers)
◆ 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
◆ The Sung Praise of Israel: Prophecy and Confidence
◆ The World of the Bible: The Beatitudes
Getting Started (10 minutes)

Use a gift wrapped box as a way to introduce the topic of surprises. Before the session wrap a box and lid separately. Put a simple surprise (A Koosh® ball is a great choice because the whole group can play with it before you tell today's story.) in the box and replace the lid.

In the session, sit in a circle with the children. Say:
◆ There is a surprise in this box.
◆ Can you guess the surprise?

Pass the box around the circle. Let each child hold, shake or squeeze the box before making a guess. When the box comes back to you, take off its lid and show the surprise.

Take a minute or two to play with the surprise with the children. For example, you might choose to play a quick game of catch. Then lay the surprise aside, and as you replace the lid, say:
◆ I wish there was another surprise for each one of us in this box.
◆ What surprise do you wish was in this box?

Ask each child to name another surprise. End by saying:
◆ So many good surprises!
◆ Jesus liked good surprises, too.
◆ Listen for surprises in today's story.

Gospel Story (10 minutes)

Surprise!

Note: You can use the gift box from today’s craft activity as a focal point for today’s story. Cover the box. Every time you say, "Surprise!" lift off the cover.

“I’m not important,” says a girl. “Moms and Dads are the big ones.”

“Surprise!” says Jesus. “You are just as important to me as your mother or father.”

“I’m not important,” says a boy. “Teachers and priests are the ones God loves best.”

“Surprise!” says Jesus. “All of God’s heaven belongs to you.”

“God can’t love me,” says one sad girl. “I do bad things. God can’t love bad girls.”

“Surprise!” says Jesus. “God loves you, no matter what you’ve done. God will take away every sad and bad feeling.”

“I wish I could see God! I wish I could do what God wants!” cried one boy.

“Surprise!” says Jesus. “You already know God! You already do just what God wants.”

Surprise Snacks (15 minutes)

Before the session prepare graham crackers halves with a layer of peanut butter or cream cheese spread. Provide a selection of toppings (raisins, dried cranberries, nuts, apple slices, julienned carrots, etc.) for children to use to decorate their crackers in “surprising” ways.

Give children the opportunity to let others guess what their surprising creation is.

Praying Together (5 minutes)

Ask children to finish this prayer sentence in different ways:
◆ God loves us when we feel (name a feeling).

If answers are slow in coming, you may want to prompt children by holding up the paper-plate puppets made in today’s Storytelling Puppets activity.

Close by praying:

Thank you, God, for loving us when we’re good or bad. Thank you for loving us when we’re angry or happy. Thank you God, for being full of surprises.

Amen.

Note: Distribute this week’s At Home with the Good News to children as they depart (or e-mail it to families after the session).
Discover the Good News (5-10 minutes)
In today’s Discover the Good News you’ll find the words from today’s story. Invite parents to share the story once again with children once they get home. You’ll also find a draw-a-surprise activity to help children express their own surprising creativity.

Singing Together (5-10 minutes)
From Singing the Good News, sing together:

- “God’s Family” (p. 23 of the songbook, also available as an MP3)

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

You can also play for children the African-American spiritual “Down by the Riverside,” sung by the Blind Boys of Alabama. (Open your Winter-A Seasonal Resources folder, then click on Companion Music for options on obtaining this music.) The song is easy to sing along with. It’s imagery, drawn from the prophet Isaiah, ties together the Advent promises of God’s new world with the sacrament of baptism. Invite children to make up movements to accompany each verse.

Craft (15 minutes)
String Paint
Cover a work surface with newspaper or a drop cloth. Dress children in smocks. Have on hand supplies to clean up spills and messy hands.

Set out lengths of cord (12”-18”), string and yarn together with shallow bowls of various colors of craft paint. Provide each child with a 11” x 17” sheet of craft paper, folded in half.

Invite children to dip the length of cord into the craft paint. Lay cords in a pattern on the inside of the folded paper. Fold over the other half of the paper to cover the cords. Pull the cords gently out the side of the folded paper. Unfold the paper to discover the surprise design!

Allow pictures to dry before sending home.

Art/Story (10 minutes)
McGrath’s Prince of Peace
Draw children’s attention to McGrath’s Prince of Peace, attached to this document. Name each of the animals depicted. Then, point out to the children the unexpected or surprising pairings within the picture (honey bee and bear, lion and lamb, leopard and antelope, wolf and rabbit).

Choose one or more pairings and create a simple story involving the two animals chosen living in peace.

Music (15 minutes)
“Old MacDonald”
In keeping with the theme of surprises from today’s session, teach this favorite song from childhood, then open the gates of creativity by choosing surprising combinations of things and the sounds they might make.

Old MacDonald had a farm,
E-I-E-I-O.

And on that farm
He had a (name an object),
E-I-E-I-O.

With a (noise, noise) here,
And a (noise, noise) there,
Here a (noise),
There a (noise),
Everywhere a (noise, noise),

Old MacDonald had a farm,
E-I-E-I-O.

Instead of the usual cow with a “moo-moo here,” invite children to suggest silly things with sillier noises. How about a worm that goes “wiggle wiggle,” or a sign that goes “stop, stop.”
Storytelling

Feelings Puppets
Children build stories about feelings on paper-plate puppets.

Before the session draw simple facial expressions on four to six paper plates. Your drawings can suggest such emotions as anger, happiness, sadness, surprise or fear.

In the session sit with the children in a circle. Keep the plates face down near you. Hold up a puppet. Ask:
◆ What do you think this person feels? Tell us the story?

Accept all answers. It is the child's expression of creativity that is most important.

Encourage one or more children to make up a story that includes more than one puppet. End each story or set of stories by saying, gently, “Surprise! God loves us when we feel (name the feeling described.)”

Following Jesus Poster (5-15 minutes)
Several Winter-A sessions invite us to follow Jesus. This week, you can continue the Following Jesus activity begun in the session for the 2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, attached to this document. In today’s activity, we reassure children that we can follow Jesus, just as we are and however we feel.

Gather children around the Following Jesus poster. Point to the third picture in the four-part poster. Invite children to talk about the children following Jesus. Ask:
◆ Who feels sad in this picture? happy? angry?
◆ Are these children following Jesus, too?
◆ We can pretend that we are following Jesus on this road.
◆ If we feel sad or happy or angry, we can still follow Jesus.

Invite each child to name a feeling as he or she adds a sticker to the poster.

Young Children and the Gospel
Last week we explored Jesus’ call to the first disciples and to us. This week, the beatitudes teach us what it means to follow Jesus.

As is often the case, in these familiar verses Jesus turns our typical way of thinking “upside down,” telling us, “Happy are those who mourn,” and “Happy are those who are persecuted.”

Such paradoxes are beyond a young child’s understanding, but they can begin to understand that Jesus and God act in surprising ways.

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.
  — A child-friendly version of the story told in today’s Core Session—Surprise!
  — A helpful article for catechists on Preventive Discipline.
  — A helpful article for catechists on the use of Time Out in group management.
  — The Following Jesus Poster, to be used in the activity of the same name.
  — McGrath’s Prince of Peace, to be used in today’s Art activity.
  — A family paper, At Home with the Good News, to print and distribute or to e-mail to families for use at home.

◆ Open your Winter-A Seasonal Resources folder, then click on Seasonal Articles to find:
  — Information on Winter-A’s Models of the Faith.
  — A printable article that explores much more about Jesus’ Beatitudes.
  — A printable article on faith and the environment titled To Serve and Guard the Earth.
  — A printable article that looks at Using Poetry in Faith Formation.
  — The Introduction for Preschool/Kindergarten for Living the Good News.
More about Today's Scriptures

Today's scriptures underline the upside-down nature of life in God’s kingdom. Zephaniah paradoxically asserts that in humility and suffering God’s people will find security. Paul insists that God’s foolishness and weakness are more powerful than worldly wisdom and strength. In the Beatitudes, Jesus describes true happiness in a way of life that runs contrary to ordinary human expectations.

Zephaniah 2:3; 3:12-13
A contemporary of Jeremiah, the prophet Zephaniah proclaimed God’s message during the early part of King Josiah’s reign (640–609 BCE). The first verse of the book suggests that the prophet was an intimate of the court, royal by lineage and familiar with the political intrigues of the day. His message deals more with the corruption and faithlessness of the religious leaders and less with the overwhelming needs of the poorer class.

In today’s reading, Zephaniah includes a note of hope in his otherwise ominous prophecy. Though the day of the Lord’s anger will bring a judgment more complete and horrifying than ever before experienced, a remnant will be saved. This remnant will be characterized by a humble attitude of dependence on God, a spirit of truth and fearlessness.

1 Corinthians 1:26-31
In the verses immediately preceding today’s reading (1:18-25), Paul declares that the wisdom of God, as manifested in the cross, appears to be folly to the worldly wise, while to those in the process of salvation, it reveals the true power of God.

God’s act of “foolishness” and “weakness” (v. 25) confounds both what the Jews expected of the Messiah and what non-Jews (Greeks, Gentiles) believed about God’s power and wisdom. This principle of reversal is illustrated by the Corinthian community itself. Most of its members were not from the intellectual, political or social elite. But God chose what the world counts worthless to overturn the world’s expectations.

Those so chosen have nothing in themselves of which they can boast. They have life only in Christ who fulfills as “our wisdom” all the promises of the Greek and Jewish ideas of wisdom; as “our righteousness,” the promise of the Mosaic law; as “our sanctification,” the promise of holiness; and as “our redemption,” the promise of salvation in the prophetic writings (v. 30).

Matthew 5:1-12a
Matthew gathers the teaching of Jesus into five great discourses and balances them with narratives of Jesus’ deeds. Today’s reading is the first of a series drawn from the first discourse, the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5–7).

The “blessed” in the Old Testament are those who receive an earthly fulfillment—of prosperity, offspring and long life. In later Jewish writing, the blessings belong to those who will enter the final age of salvation. Jesus offers these future blessings now, for the kingdom is present in him.

The first four beatitudes reflect attitudes that climax with an unceasing hunger for a right relationship with God—both personally and communally. The second four reflect the actions and lifestyles of those who hunger in this way. In verse 10, Jesus teaches that those who live the Beatitudes will face persecution, for this way is contrary to all that the world espouses.

Reflection

In her book Embracing Our Blessing, Kathleen Chesto shows a different side of the Beatitudes, a side especially helpful for those who may say, “Oh no, here they come again!”

We tend to glaze over readings that recur frequently in the liturgical cycle, so a new perspective is helpful here. Chesto says many of us regard the Beatitudes with the same dread we have for the Commandments, yet another list of Things We Must Do. Instead, she points to the Jewish tradition of blessing, acknowledging God’s holiness in the people, places and things encountered daily. So too, when Jesus looked at the crowd, he saw God’s greatness. He would have walked among them laying his hands on their heads just as Jewish parents blessed their children.

Can we too use the Beatitudes as guidelines to recognize our gifts? When we feel a flood of generosity towards a relative or compassion for a friend who is grieving, is not that God’s goodness flowing through us? When we anguish over the daily news and long for justice to the world’s oppressed, isn’t that the first step towards making a difference? When we act to do the most loving thing, we too are blessed.
The Scriptures and the Catechism

Jesus speaks to his disciples for the first time. His challenge to a life of holiness is now fleshed out in the teaching of the Beatitudes (CCC, #1716–28). The happiness of the disciple can only be achieved by following these directives given by Jesus. The kingdom of God, which is the way Jesus identifies God’s saving and transforming presence in our world, requires a completely changed vision of our world and its revaluation according to these beatitudes (CCC, #1807, 1886–89). Our life in Christ demands an ever-deepening assimilation of Christ’s vision and values (CCC, #1691–96, 1699–1709).

The Sung Praise of Israel: Prophecy and Confidence

by Kathy McGovern

Just as we believe that the written scriptures are inspired, the Hebrews viewed their music as also directly given by God. The chronicler, looking back at temple worship from the poignant nostalgia of the post-exile, says no less than King David himself decided “who should prophesy with lyres, harps and cymbals” (1 Chronicles 25:1b). Notice that these musicians don’t just make music. They prophesy. They are placed in the same sacred category as the heroes of Israel who spoke the word of the Lord.

Of course the entire Psalter is attributed to David, but some psalms are specifically recalled as authored by other great heroes of the faith. Moses must have been thinking of his long sojourn with the desperate Israelites when he wrote “Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations” (Psalm 90:1).

The third chapter of Habakkuk is a psalm of confidence and trust, ending in this canticle: “Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines, though the fruit of the olive fails and the fields yield no food… yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation” (3:17-18). Following this promise is a superscription to the Hebrew orchestra, reminding them to play this song of praise on stringed instruments.

The World of the Bible

The Beatitudes

The Beatitudes introduce Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matthew, chapters 5–7) and declare the joy that attends membership in the kingdom of God. The Greek word for blessed implies the highest state of happiness. In this passage, the word stands for a Hebrew word meaning literally “How happy!”

The Beatitudes describe the people who receive the promises of the kingdom, the kingdom that is both present as well as future. Matthew’s use of the phrase “kingdom of heaven” rather than “kingdom of God” is a way of referring to God without using God’s name, following the Hebrew tradition that the name of God was too holy to articulate.

How are we to understand the beatitudes? Jesus emphasizes the reversal of values that can be expected in God’s kingdom. Jesus’ Beatitudes imply that God is affronted by fundamental injustices of an economic system—thus God will right the lot of the poor and oppressed. On the other hand, Jesus made no blanket condemnation of wealth. But he did, however, stress that wealth and material satisfaction have nothing to do with true happiness.

The promises, or rewards (Matthew 5:12), suggested in the Beatitudes offer essentially the same benefit: fullness of life in the presence of God.