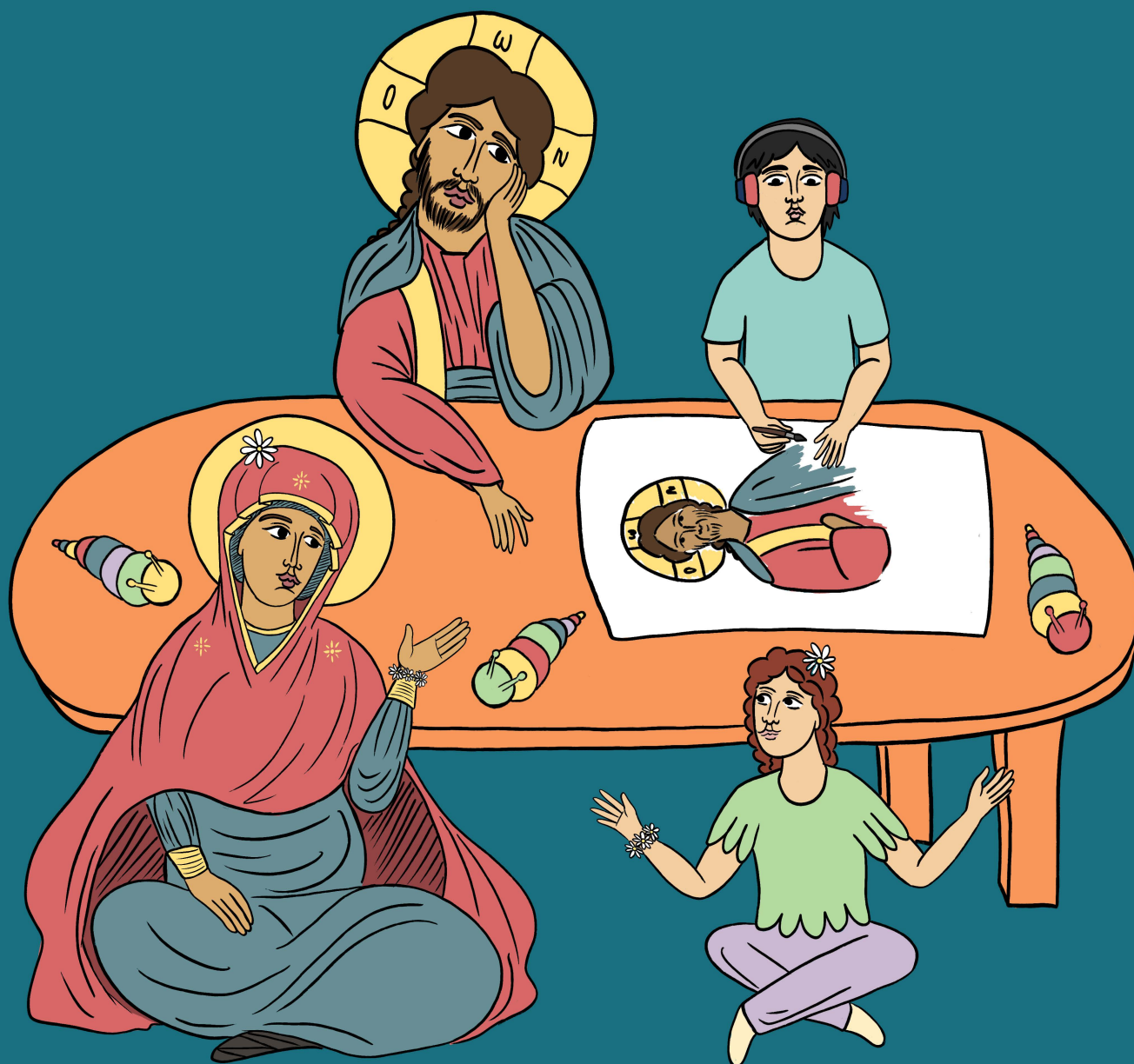


GOD WITH US

High Support Sunday School



An Accessible Church School Curriculum
Summer Kinard, M.Div., Th.M.

Developed with the generous support of the Hellenic Foundation

God With Us

High Support Sunday School

An Accessible Church School Curriculum

Summer Kinard, M.Div., Th.M.



PARK END BOOKS

Greenville, Michigan 2026

Published as a free PDF to enable live links.

Developed with the generous support of the Hellenic Foundation

©2026, Summer Kinard.

NOT FOR COMMERCIAL USE. You may print this curriculum and share the lessons with attribution for learning purposes, but it should not be sold or remunerated either in whole or part. It is free by donation of the author and with the support of a grant from the Hellenic Foundation, to the glory of God and to feed the high needs sheep and lambs of Christ our Lord.

This PDF includes Amazon affiliate links to materials, as well as descriptions for searches if you choose to not use the links. If you use the Amazon links, the author will receive a small commission from sales with no additional cost to you. However, the descriptions should give ample search terms to find materials without using the links if you choose.

Where appropriate, we have linked to public domain artworks and story sequences. Links are separated out rather than hyperlinked so that people who print the curriculum don't lose them.

You may not sell the Visual Lord's Prayer and Visual Schedule for the Divine Liturgy or any other Boardmaker materials included herein. They are made with licensed technology to which the author holds the license for free distribution only. If you are a Boardmaker member, you can find the editable files for some materials on the author's account there.

Acknowledgements

This curriculum was requested by the high support needs autistic class at St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church in Des Plaines, Illinois, taught by Nick Petrus, at the behest of Abby Vlahos, a friend and fellow mother of an autistic child. With Abby's help, this curriculum development was supported in part by a grant from the Hellenic Foundation, which covered the materials I used to plan and test the lessons to make sure that they worked well with all ages and abilities. I am deeply grateful to the Hellenic Foundation for their support and for Abby for reaching out to ask me to share these lessons, which are tailored to children with high support needs. I love that when she asked how to teach children who are nonspeaking and have low motor control, she knew that I would love to help. I am grateful to Nick for letting me contribute to his class. Without his empathy and skill as a speech language pathologist and a musician, coming up with lessons would have been more of a challenge. Knowing that he had the gift of bringing the children together for music and that he would recognize the value in slowly building lessons and skills over time to allow for generalization and predictability, I was able to spend a lot more time getting to the point of lessons rather than explaining every single choice. Thank you also to the amazing, so loved, gifted and dear children of St. John the Baptist, whom I have had the privilege to meet and serve by God's grace. Thank you to the understanding and insightful and truly gracious clergy of St. John the Baptist, whose leadership helps to make the disability community thrive in that place. I appreciate the contributions and thoughtfulness of all the parents and families and supportive helpers I met there. You are all such lights! Thank you for shining.

Read more about the class for which this curriculum is written:

<https://orthodoxobserver.org/how-a-sunday-school-became-a-sanctuary-for-children-with-disabilities/>

<https://orthodoxobserver.org/she-almost-stopped-coming-now-she-leads-her-parishes-autism-ministry/>

This curriculum includes a menu for allergy-friendly bulk meals kindly given by (Matushka) Melissa Naasko. Thank you so much for sharing your talent for caring through food with us! The Zacchaeus craft and the Theotokos line art were commissioned from my dear godmother, the iconographer and artist Elina Pelikan. Thank you for offering so many beautiful opportunities to love God and people with you! I thank God whenever I think of you. Thank you also to Mary Sarchizian for her tenderhearted and insightful cover art of our Lord and the Holy Theotokos playing with autistic children. You know God as kin, and your art shines with the closeness of God with each of us. Thank you for sharing your talent with this project.

I also want to thank my children, the Children of Joy, who have played through so many of these lessons over the years and shown me that they “stick.” As an autistic mother of autistic children, I have some insights about what might overwhelm or be not plain enough or might seem weird to autistic children, but my own children with their various personalities have shown me so much more! I was able with help and a great deal of hard study, hard work, prayer, and many sleep deprived days, to be able to reach my three nonspeaking children so that they were able to communicate and eventually to speak. Because of the deep empathy and love we shared in those years of nonspeaking (and the sometimes reversions to nonspeaking), I have been able to find touchpoints for participation with AAC (augmentative and alternative

communication) and through actions. Thank you, children, for letting me teach you as well as mother you, and thank you for welcoming me as a co-learner among you. We are all so loved by God With Us, and I love that we have been able to experience such grace in learning together.

Thank you also to the adults and children whom I have taught over the years. Adults, thank you for trusting me with my “weird” hands-on accessible church school model, when you were used to just sitting back and being taught at. Thank you for trusting that learning in a fun way would also be lasting. I love hearing from you when you remember lessons from twenty years ago. That was the goal, of course, but when you have told me, it has been a great encouragement that I was following the Holy Spirit in the right direction. Thank you to co-teachers and parents who trusted me enough to follow a class pattern of action-based prayers and lessons when it was not something you had seen before. Thank you to all the children who joyfully learned with me! When I close my eyes and see you alight with understanding as you fish for people or pretend to be an angel speaking to St. Nektarios or walk the path of Christ on Palm Sunday or laugh as we toss ball pit balls into the giant playpen for you to swim in them when you find a way to prepare your hearts to receive the Gospel or hold the little candles so carefully in your small hands to offer them to Christ or to place your slightly squashed wildflowers in front of the Holy Theotokos, I give thanks. Thank you for helping me prepare the way for you to see God, dear ones.

Thank you also to the Clay girls, whose faithful participation in Thursday Saints Preschool hour has been such a joy to me. You have helped to test these lessons so that they were not just ideas in my head but blessed memories of us learning together. Thank you, Samantha, for bringing your children and participating while we all sing and play together.

Thank you to my husband, Andrew, who has listened to my ideas as I refined them, who joyfully supported the family and gave extra hours to care tasks so I would have time to write down all these lessons that were formerly only in my head or scratched out in notes. You helped me count the cost to write this curriculum, and you helped me pay it. Thank you for being truly Christlike, as it makes my efforts to imagine the virtues easy. I just remember you.

Introduction: God With Us High Support Sunday School

Welcome to this immersive, hands-on curriculum for high-support needs autistic students, with communication and executive function supports, based on the Greek Orthodox Sunday lectionary. The teachings herein spring from the belief that the God Who Loves Humankind (*Philanthrope*) and Who is With Us (*Emmanuel*) can teach even those who are silent, can and does teach and reach every person He has created. **With this loving presence of God, we reach people not by lowering learning standards but by raising supports.**

That means we will start with the principles of accessible learning, making a safe environment with supports for predictability, executive function, sensory kindness and integration, gross motor emphasis, music emphasis, full inclusion of AAC and speech output, expectations that children will form memories and learn best through joyful play and acting out stories, and explicitly pointing out God's love and presence and other important lessons needed to fully experience God's presence. We focus on declarative language rather than questions and give actionable options and actions. We focus on prayers as actions because faith, hope, and love are made visible in our actions. The Holy Spirit is made visible in our loving actions towards one another. This is a curriculum of faith that you can touch, one anchored on all senses but especially the three most important to forming memories: interoception, vestibular, and proprioception (the latter two of which can be summed up as gross motor movements). We also include music and rhythm as much as possible, because the classroom for which this curriculum was developed is led by a musician, and more vitally because music and gross motor movements are the great teachers and regulators of the brain. Everything we learn that is paired with music and gross motor movements

will “stick” far better, bring more attention, and form more lasting memories than other attempts at teaching. In therapeutic communities, it is said that “neurons that fire together wire together,” and in the church we have the words of St. Benedict of Nursia along the same lines, “He that works as he prays lifts his heart to God with his hands.” That principle of “prayer and work,” *ora et labora*, has deeply formed my own faith for many decades; it was how I was reared by my grandmothers to put my faith into action, and from this long practice springs this curriculum as some of the fruits.

I tell you this to emphasize that “sensory learning” is not only or primarily about the “five senses” but about engagement of the whole person, the whole body, through **meaningful, supported gross motor movements**. Christ and the early church taught in the peripatetic tradition of being on site and moving around to teach. You see this when Christ references real life events and practices like fishing and shepherding and baking and cleaning the house and setting the lamps. These lessons were not taught abstractly but in the presence of the actions referenced. When Christ said, “the poor you have always with you,” it was not abstract advice to Judas but a reference to the hospitality that Martha and Mary practiced in their house, where Christ said those words, because the poor were indeed there with them, included in the banquets Martha set before the Lord. (You even hear from some of those bystanders, who called out, “Blessed is the womb that bore you!” and so on.) We cannot transport our classrooms to the time when our Lord was teaching in person, but we can follow His example of teaching as concretely and realistically and close to life as possible. Thus the patterns herein are anchored in sensory realities of trees and boats and buildings and butter and lights and water, in actions like giving and receiving and setting boundaries,

in the acting out of saints' lives and skits that illustrate how holy tradition works over time.

A Note on Practical, Applied Theology

The Orthodox tradition of apophatic logic is honored here not in vagaries or abstractions, which do not communicate well to anyone (much less high support needs students), but through dramatic interpretation. Thus we see that God is not like false gods through skits, that saints like Saint Brigid are not stingy and ungenerous through acting out her life with humor, that God never leaves us through hands-on lessons with lights and water and clouds.

When the tradition has given us a good pun and leaned into it, as in the case of the theological language of perichoresis, the “mutual indwelling of the persons” of the Holy Trinity, language meant to keep people from collapsing the economic and immanent Trinity but which (like most of this sentence) is far and away too abstract to make sense to most people, which sounds the same as perichoresis, to dance around, we make the pun part of the learning. Why? The same pun is in the Latin, which means the pun is intended as part of the meaning. That's because theology is not about sitting around trying to describe God to other word nerds and people who want to categorize what they cannot see or understand; the theologians who get described with a capital T—the Theologians—describe God's universal love. Love is dynamic, not only in strength but in motion. If you try to look at this living God Who Loves us and is in relationship with us, you see movement, because you are only able to know God through God's love, which though “simple” and “incomprehensible,” is also active and relational; we know love through experiences of relationship, through participating in love (God). The Holy

Trinity icon with the Church at the near side of the table invites us all into communion with God, not to BE a Person of the Trinity, but to know the Holy Trinity through participation so that we (eternally) become like God. God wants us to know Him, and that knowledge is not static; it is joy and life and love in action as well as the enlightenment and consolations of the soul and spirit. This is why we teach with the idea of dancing. From outside a dance of three equals, you cannot discern a particular face, but when they invite you in to dance with them, ah! Then you see God face to face, through Christ, of course, and through the moving love of God which cannot be pinned down or understood but which can be experienced. We are talking here of the experience of God as Holy Trinity in love, and that is not confusing at all. Apophatic reasoning is fine when you need it, but it's unnecessary to tell the silent children that the Word Who was born an infant and loves them is "not the Father or the Holy Spirit." You can instead show them by inviting them to imitate and know the Word, to experience the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to call out with that same Holy Spirit and the Son, "Abba! Father!"

I hope this very brief explanation will assuage concerns of those who are unused to seeing practical, applied, lived theology; my dear ones in Christ, if you cannot show this love of Christ to His lambs, please join the lambs and start anew as children to encounter Him in His kindness in these pages. (But if I erred anywhere here, forgive me. I was trying to do as my dear friend among the saints, St. Gregory the Theologian, advised, and help these dear ones of the Father to receive the whole fullness of the Godhead in their hearts by love by opening their noetic faculties through careful teaching. I was trying to do as my dear St. John the Theologian, who ever astonishes me with his descriptions of God's love, by loving these dear ones as Christ loves me,

teaching as He did. I am only a little-t theologian, so forgive me when I failed.)

Accessible Church School Model

This high support curriculum builds additional supports onto the Accessible Church School model, which already far exceeds the inclusion, accessibility, and support practices of most educational models. For that reason, it might be helpful to refer to my other books, *Accessible Church School:*

Incarnational Practices for Participating in God (Park End Books, 2023), which is half pictures illustrating the ideas and not nearly as intimidating as the title makes it sound, and *Of Such is the Kingdom: A Practical Theology of Disability* (Ancient Faith Publishing, 2019), especially the middle chapters

on prayer and teaching. I also have a lot of overviews of the ideas on my website summerkinard.com and illustrated in images and reels on my social media hashtag #accessiblechurchschool. The following is a brief overview of required elements, and the printables are included at the end of this introduction before the next section. The basic difference between this curriculum and a regular Accessible Church School classroom is that we have pared down the language needs more, focused on declarative language and concrete examples even more, provided more speech output button supports, added lights to direct movements and track progress, and assumed that interacting without words is a standard, not an outlying, outcome. That means that I expect learning to occur long-term with recurring interactions with prayer practices, sensory bin lessons, and sensory activities.

Neurotypical, abled teachers might be loath to repeat lessons and set out the same sensory bin or sensory experience (lighted tile churches, water with submersible LEDs, etc) for several weeks. But autistic kids LOVE REPETITION. The predictability of starting every month with an icon

matching prayer sensory bin suits autistic kids just fine. Building up a lesson over two or three weeks allows for people with different speeds or manners of processing to catch the details, to engage their imaginations and understanding and attention. To use a high support curriculum, therefore, the first and biggest support to add is to set aside abled assumptions about learning and attention.

Make the patterns predictable. Let the kids come to rely on the prayer pattern in every class, and they will become more able to participate over time. By keeping to the same general action pattern (a class plan or visual schedule) week by week, you allow competency-scanning autistics to relax because they learn what it takes for them to successfully participate in class. This is nearly impossible for them if, for instance, you sometimes skip the entry prayer walk with the icons or remove another big piece of the pattern. Let them feel they are a valued member of class by showing them consistently what is expected. Here we bring the icon to the lights; here we hold the silk and press, “Lord, have mercy.” Here we act out the story. Here we sing the song. Here we play at the table, and so on. By repeating patterns of actions, you allow the pattern recognition of autistic children to see how they fit in the story of God.

Class Plan

This lesson set assumes a class plan, a pattern of movements and activities that you will follow every week. You can be flexible with the order, but once you find one that works, keep it each week as much as possible. This particular curriculum is for a classroom that has a class plan with interactive light buttons, so students can push the buttons to track progress through the

class. You can also use a light button board /wall area to track the story sequences. Lights make directions around the room easier to track as well. For instance, putting two lights in the prayer corner and asking children to place icons “between the lights,” is a better support with easier to follow instructions than “take it to the prayer corner.” The lower support person might know what to do with the icon once they get there; the same instruction without the support of “and place it between the lights,” might lead to confusion for a high support needs learner.

There are some example class plans at the end of this introduction, set up as one sheet to be posted/displayed around the room as well as broken into series for a light board wall.

Interactive Prayers

ENTRY: I have seen consistent growth with having students bring mini or micro icons (I purchase them from Legacy icons) into the class to the prayer corner as their Entry Prayer. When I have room and the ability to set up baskets on tables or walls, I have seen that people are also eager to bring flowers into the room to the Holy Theotokos. These are the two options I have provided because they are so well loved, but if you want your students to bring in something else that goes with your patron saint (animal finger puppets for a Saint Mammas or Saint Modestos class; scallop seashells to represent baptism and remembering their baptisms for a John the Baptist class; handfuls of flower petals for the Myrrhbearers), please feel free. The other option that I have often used is a bit high-maintenance but well loved: You can have a set of battery powered LED candle tapers by the door and have students bring them in to put them in a pretty pan filled with kinetic sand in the prayer corner. This works very well but requires battery changes as well as teachers who do not see playing with the kinetic sand as irreverent. (Instead, anything that is soothing in Sunday school is going to form a good

association with God for these high needs kids! Redirect into talking about prayer and let the kids explore separate sand at a table rather than getting frustrated.)

GROUP: Gather around a silk to pray together, and by doing so, you make a group with a common goal and shared holiness without demanding speech ability. Using a large silk scarf in green to represent the iconic color of the Holy Spirit allows students to see the movement of air the way our actions show love. This fluttering association with prayer is something the students can also see if they watch the priest during the Divine Liturgy. I recommend having a speech output button for “Kyrie Eleison” as well as the group leader and any speaking students modeling the prayer after each petition or a few times even if no one is able to put a prayer request into words.

PRACTICING: For learning particular prayers, I recommend visual prayers like the visual Lord’s Prayer (Our Father) and visual sequence of the Jesus Prayer, **ALONG WITH** speech output buttons recorded with the “Our Father,” the three-fold “Kyrie Eleison” or “Lord, Have Mercy” and options for gross motor praying. (The visual prayers are included at the end of this introduction.) For instance, you can cut circles from shelf liner to make a slip-resistant prayer rope pattern around the room for students to walk as you all pray the Jesus Prayer together. Even better, for high sensory seeking students, bring in light up tonal stepping stones and have them step on them around the room as you say the Jesus Prayer. Arrange the circle of stepping stones so they form a circle with the prayer corner where your cross would be on a regular prayer rope.

MEDITATIVE: Provide a seeking prayer box with little icons and crosses buried in rose petals (or lavender, but it is dusty) for students to use calmly alone or in small groups. You can also make large sensory bins with petals for lessons like the Pearl of Great Price where you include a jumbo sized pearl prop in the petals to be found along with the other prayer items, and these

can be brought out for prayerful seeking.

CONCLUSION: Being the bee by either naming something that they liked OR touching something they liked in class with the bee puppet, then taking it to the Holy Theotokos, is a way for the children to participate in offering their learning experience to God and to see that they were together with God in class. You can build up their awareness over time of God with them with this practice. Start with people with lower expressive communication abilities by using “I Like This” cards with your bee. Later, as understanding builds, you can expand this to finding things in common with God by noting what reminded you of LOVE. (God’s character is love, and we become like God when we love.)

Music Options

While hymns of the Church are always welcome, they often do not repeat often enough to be accessible to high support needs students. That’s why I recommend picking a class hymn for the year or semester or as an always-hymn, like with a patronal hymn that churches hear every Sunday. Because of the emphasis on the love of God and making wise the “simple” fishermen, I highly recommend the Pentecostal (Holy Trinity) Apolytikion for an always-hymn. I will provide simple songs to easy to sing tunes sometimes as well to highlight a month’s theme. Use your skills to go beyond my recommendations! I am just giving a “starter kit” here.

I have found that many students like to use egg shakers or drums or scarves in music time. If you provide shakers or other loud instruments, please also provide noise-buffering earmuffs so students with sensitive ears can participate.

Lesson Repeats

Though I have included expansion lessons here, usually the best approach for deeper learning is to repeat a scriptural story at least twice, usually three

times, expanding and building out the lesson each week after reviewing what was learned before. This has the effect of building memory, helping to form connections between different parts of scripture, theology, hymns, and saints' lives, and allowing for more processing through playing with props, singing, and making artwork. You can also delve into patterns of settings like "stories told by night" or "stories told by the sea" or "stories in the wilderness," which will help autistic and neurodivergent students especially, as they tend to remember according to settings and three-dimensional spaces rather than isolated words. This kind of reasoning helps students make connections for comparison (and/or contrast) between stories in similar settings, like Nicodemus meeting Jesus in secret and Samuel hearing God in the night, or noticing that Jesus teaching on the mountain reminds them of Moses teaching on the mountain, or Jesus calling His disciples by the sea and Jesus appearing to them by the sea after the Resurrection to call them into their new role as Apostles. (There are so many more connections!)

You can dig deeper if you stay with one story all month, adding on with sensory anchors and tools like acting out stories, acting out saint's lives that highlight the meaning in the Gospel, using the spinning selection wheel to find patterns in the scripture (sensory anchors like trees, water, wilderness, lifting up, rescue) or to choose between fun activities on a bonus week, with choices like "act out the story" or "sensory bin time" or "sing with musical instruments" or "work on art together" or "game" (if relevant).

Since the Orthodox lectionary repeats every year, there is a lot of repetition built into the curriculum anyway. Therefore, if you think the kids "get" a particular lesson after one time through on the second or third year going through it, you can go to the next lesson or saint's life. Any time you need to fill in a gap, act out a saint's life. The lives of the saints make the meanings of the Gospels plain/obvious to everyone. They open the scriptures so that we understand what we are hearing, having seen the Gospel in action in the saints.

Monthly Lessons & Special Events

Whenever possible, I have also included a lesson for the whole parish to learn more about God With Us in Disabilities. I have included a mini Vacation Church School lesson set and a Sensory-Friendly Action Nativity Play and a session on how parishes can support families with disabilities, including allergy-friendly recipes developed and tested by Matushka Melissa Naasko, author of *Fasting as a Family* and *Hospitality for Healing*, a mother of eleven, caterer, and wife of a priest who serves a monastic community where Mat. Melissa feeds crowds every week. These recipes will help church groups who get together to make meals in bulk to include autistic families, who have a very high rate of food allergies, in their meal ministries. The recipes are provided for one family or scaled up with ingredients for bulk cooking.

Story Sequence & Acting Out the Story

Depending on your group and that week's support needs, you can start slowly by sequencing first, or you can first get out the props for that week, whether modular building cushions, interactive artwork and speech output buttons, dress up, or sensory bins with peg dolls. Telling the story WHILE acting it out is fun for many students, but it lowers anxiety to have the sequence set out first. You can repeat the sequence as you act it out with the props for the week. Though I recommend starting with the sequence, I say it is optional because the lessons repeat. That means that sometimes you are on week three of the lesson, and it might make sense if you've added a new, very fun way to teach that lesson (sensory bins filled with mustard seeds, for instance) to go ahead and direct the students to the props as you tell the story, reinforcing it with the sequence afterward. As you assess the students' working memory and understanding, you can decide how much support they need to hold up pictures in order. But it's nice for the students to either be able to Velcro or clip them to a sequence board OR to hold up the pictures and sequence themselves in a line to show the order of the story.

Materials Needed

I highly recommend the following for a high support needs classroom:

Visual Schedules of the Class Plan

Visual Language Prayers

Recordable speech output buttons

Push-button LED lights for tracking progress/sensory input (with batteries) A wall or portable stand for sequencing with push-lights and clips/Velcro 10 Recordable 30-second Speech Output Buttons (for prayers and lessons)

For loose, non-attached LED push lights and Speech Output Buttons, you can add silicone bottle boots to the bottoms to protect the lights and buttons from damage when students drop or toss them.

Modular building couches for making settings (and sensory relief cubbies as needed) Warm floor or table lamps or other indirect lighting (café lights or twinkle lights)

Fluorescent light covers if you meet in a room where overhead lighting is necessary and fluorescent (AVOID IF AT ALL POSSIBLE BY USING LAMPS!)

Dress up clothes to look like icons or Bible characters: such as laurel crowns, fancy jeweled play crowns, wooden crosses (for martyrs' hands), Large mesh metallic fabric for soldiers (large rectangles with a head hole cut in the center), metallic ribbons for belts, silk play scarfs, fabric remnant rectangles with head holes cut so they can be belted into costumes.

Bird puppets (either nice ones from Folkmanis or simple laminated bird cut-outs on popsicle sticks) to act out the many Bible stories with birds

At least one bee puppet (Folkmanis makes them) or wooden bee props

Large underbed plastic storage totes for sensory bins (OR a large sensory bin/water table if you have room & budget)

Kinetic sand in bulk for sensory bins

Blank peg dolls to decorate as saints with crayons Spinning choice wheel

Rose petals or lavender for sensory bins or prayer boxes

A carved holy icon that students are allowed to trace with their fingers

A pretty Gospel book (one of your monthly art lessons can be decorating a pretty cover with jewels)

Print-outs of the Bible story sequences for that lesson set Sensory canoes if there's room (linked throughout, or find your preferred ones at a royalty-free site such as freebibleimages.org)

Model Magic clay packets for lessons and sensory input

Room to move around!

Soft or floor seating as well as chairs on perimeter or at sensory/art table

Understanding that high support needs students NEED to move

Sensory aids such as noise protectant earmuffs and weighted blankets

Sensory fidgets such as feelzies bracelets as prayer ropes, spinning toys, Mozi motion toys

Amazon General Supply List here:

https://www.amazon.com/hz/wishlist/ls/3FKT1K2WMQ89o?ref_=wl_share

Large Scale Group Art Projects

Gilding stars

Decorating Gospel Book Paint stick vinyl icon banners

Large canvases to fill in angel wings, mixing colors to learn about icon colors

Tissue paper squares filling in icon patterns on clear contact paper to make a stained glass-like hanging

Coloring Peg Dolls of saints (around once/month)

Mixing myrrh (Sunday of Myrrh-bearers)

Frankincense & myrrh sachets (Nativity)

Illuminating manuscript pages with gold and bright paint

September

- Being Simon to Each Other Group Learning
- Icon Matching Prayer activity to use in large groups and ongoing (can rotate in and out of Sunday school use)
- Gospel Lectionary Lessons for September
- Saints' Lives for September: St. Phoebe, St. Euphrosynos
- Catechism lesson: Apostolic Succession with St. Irenaeus
- Elements to Consider for All-In Gatherings
- Inclusion Team-Ups
- Declarative Language primer

October

- Bearing One Another's Burdens Saint Spotlight: Saint Charitina & Autistic Teeth: St. Demetrius & Body Odor Care
- Protection of the Holy Theotokos lesson & classroom activity
- Gospel Lessons
 - ALMSGIVING, MERCY, BOUNDARIES: 2nd Sunday of Luke, first Sunday of October; Do good to all because your Father in heaven is merciful
 - PARABLE OF THE SOWER LESSONS: Sunday of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, second Sunday of October; prepare your heart to be the good soil; work on large scale icon together &/or use the icon prayer sensory bin
- Catechism lesson: God versus "the gods"

November

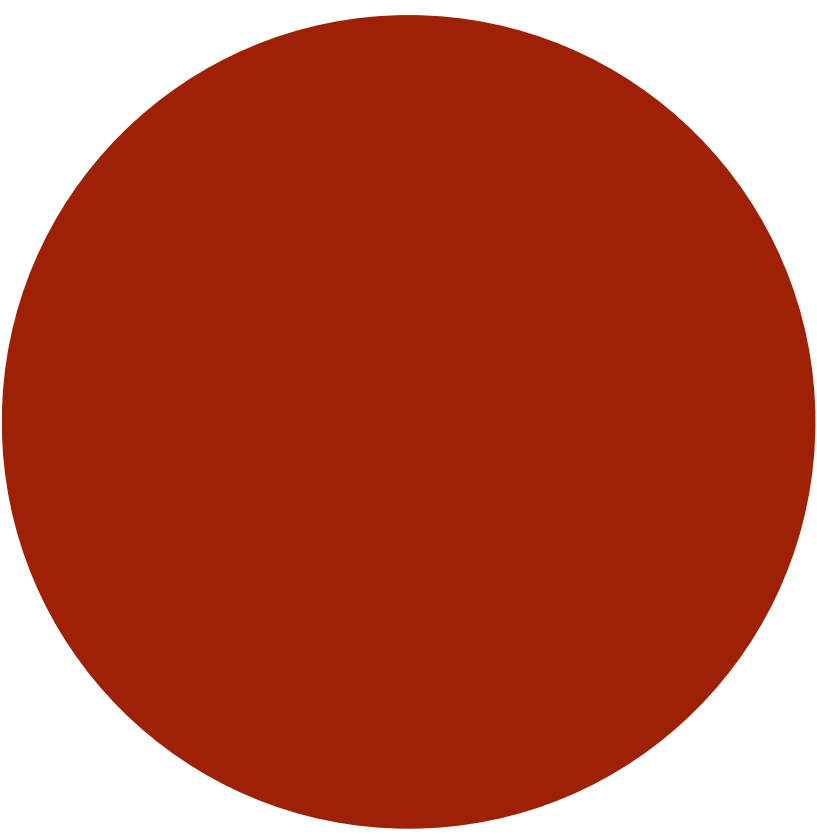
- Second Intergenerational Learning: Holy Angels & Dragon-Slaying activities; Lessons can be used for Sunday school, too.
 - Dragon-Slayer Saints: St. Marina's Hammer
 - Putting Down the Dragon with Alms
 - Other activities for Michaelmas options
- November Saints' Lives lessons
 - Sts. Cosmas and Damian (November 1)
 - Synaxis of Archangel Michael & all Bodiless Powers (November 8)
 - St. Martin of Tours take-home lesson
- Catechism lesson: Close to God, Close to each other

December

- Sensory Nativity Pageant
 - <https://summerkinard.com/2025/12/12/sensory-centered-nativity-play/>
- St. Nicholas Lessons (Inclusive)

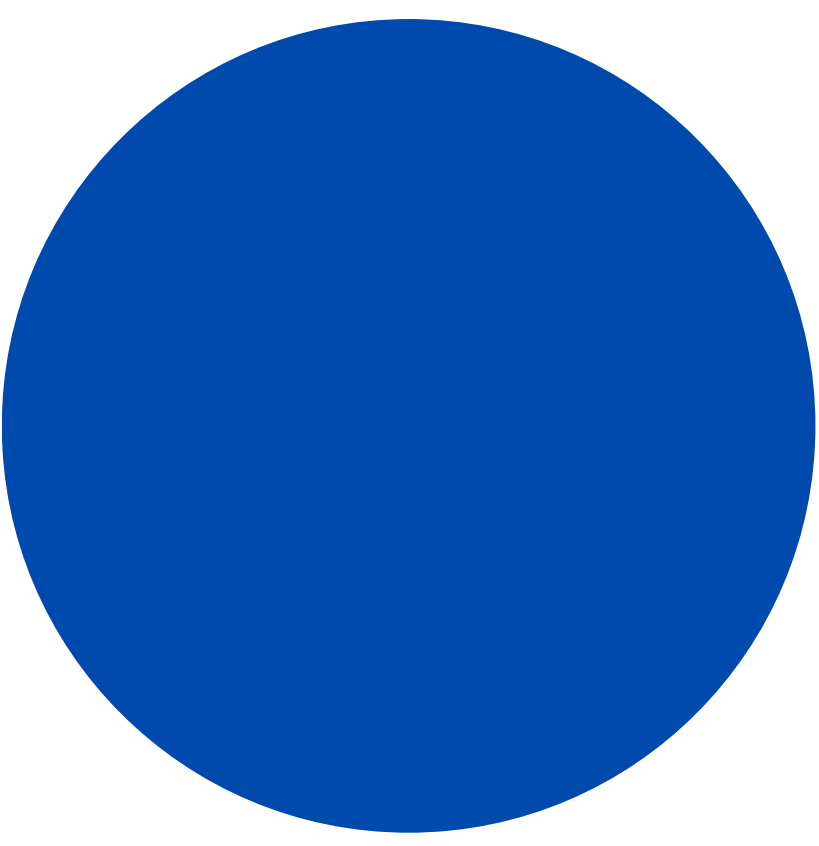
Additional Saints' Lives Examples

- Samples from forthcoming Accessible Church School saints' lives collections (Saints' Lives with Animals, Saints Who Were Sisters, Saints Who Fed the Poor, Saints Who Hid, Holy Unmercenary Healers, etc)
 - St. Herve
 - St. Amma Syncletiki
 - St. Ariadne (September 18th)



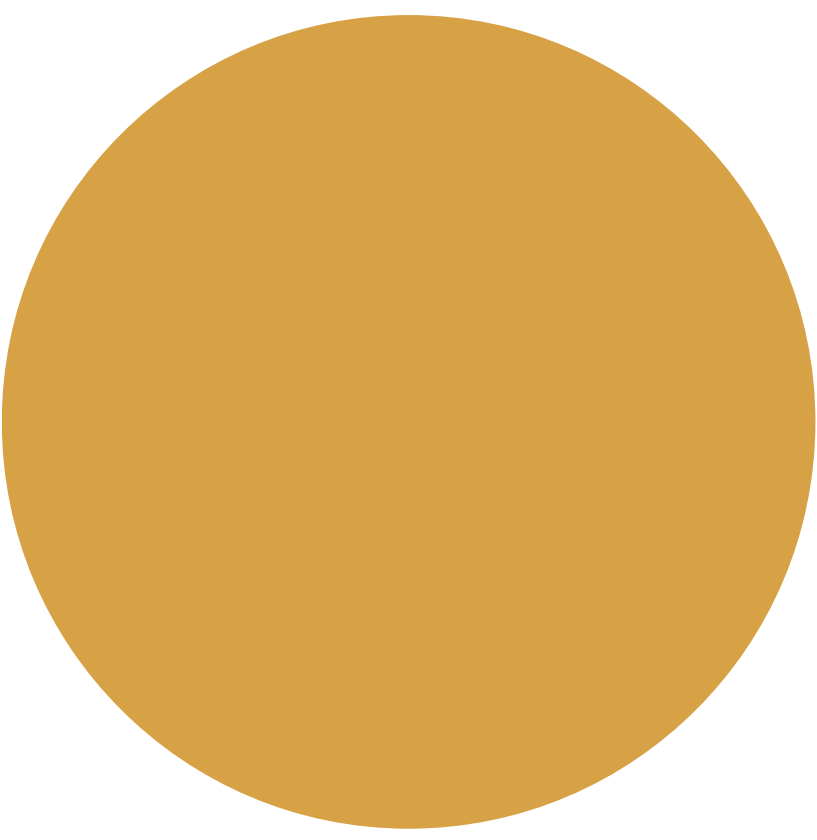
place angel icons on the rectangles as you find them

I'm safe.



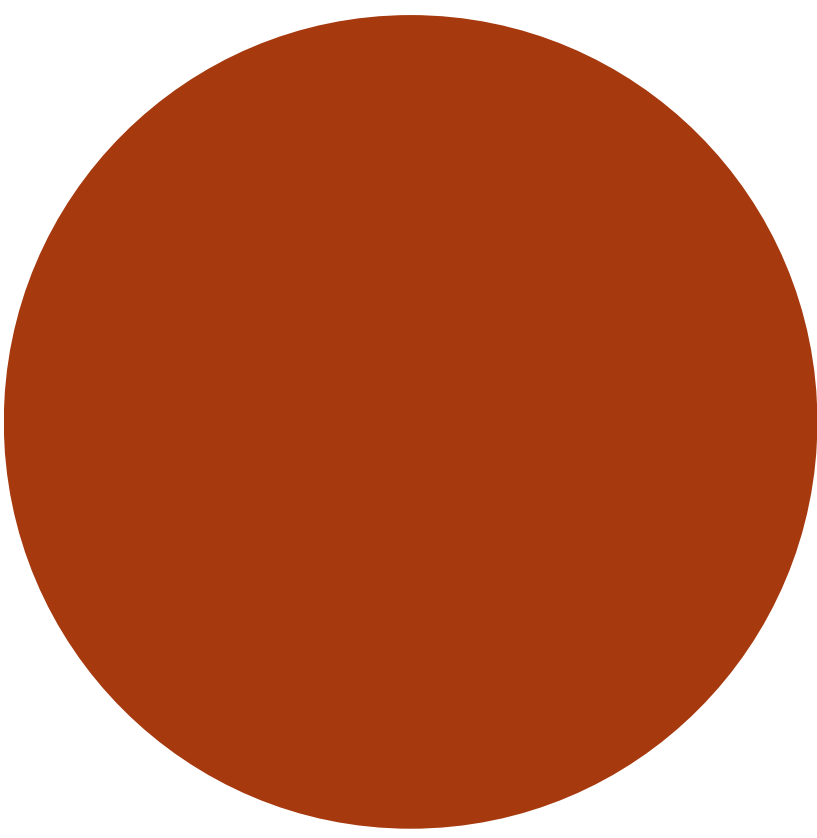
place icons on the rectangles as you find them

I'm welcome.



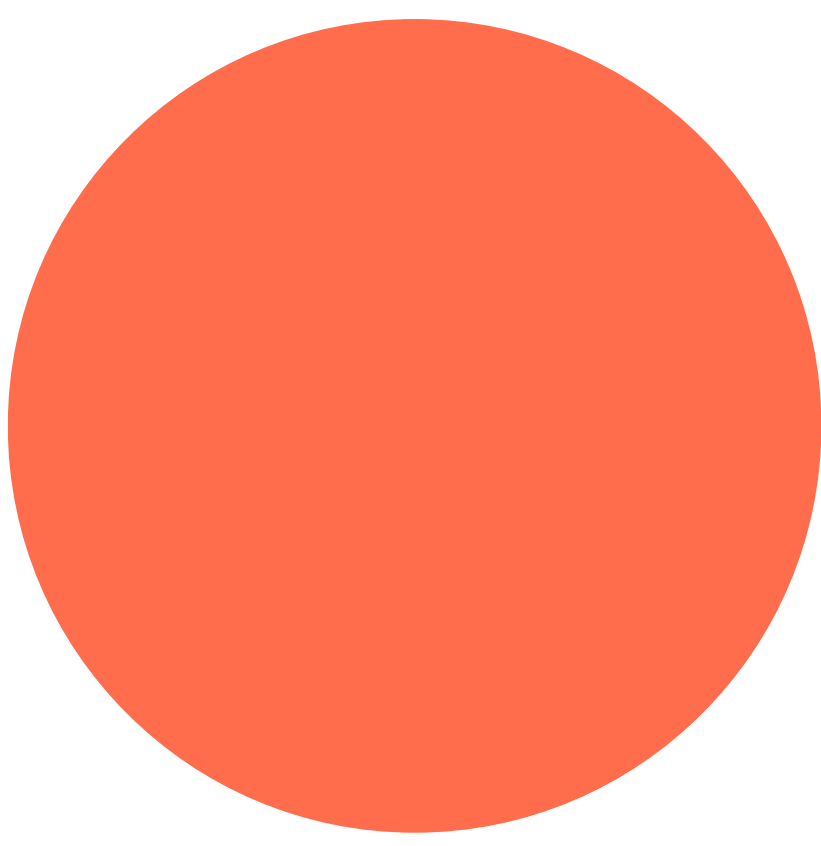
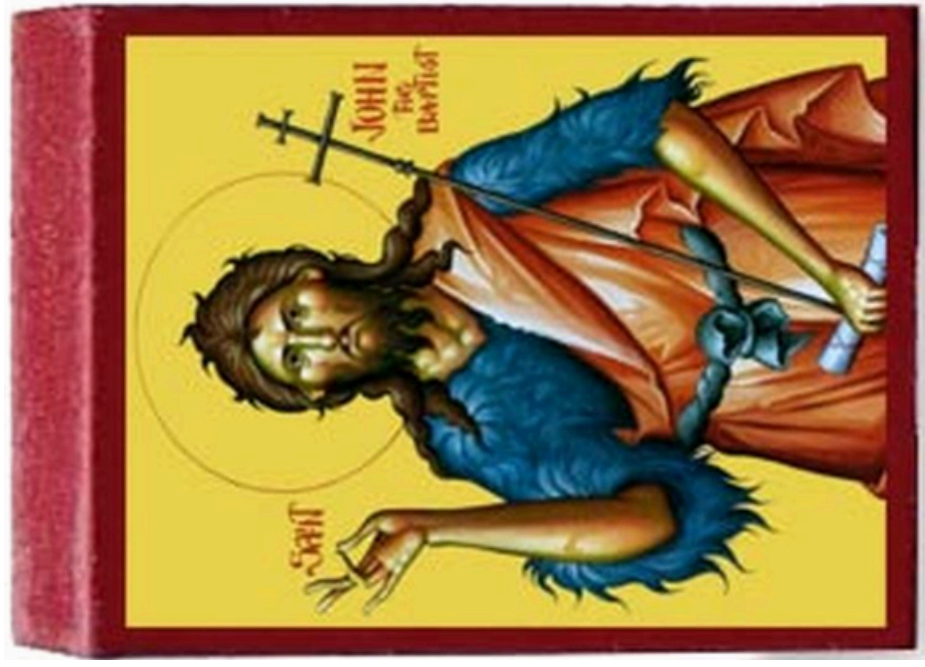
I'm guided.

place icons on the rectangles as you find them



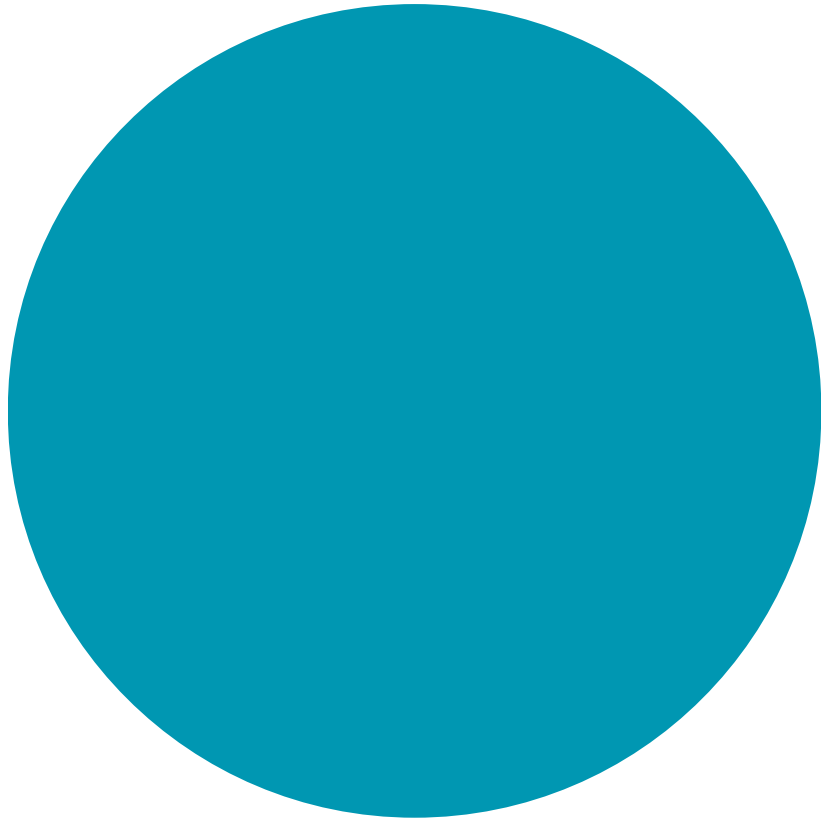
**I'm held
close.**

place icons on the rectangles as you find them



I'm prepared.

place icons on the rectangles as you find them



I'm loved.

place icons on the rectangles as you find them

Sensory Box Icon Placemats

Instructions

Print out and laminate (optional) the placemats. Record the saying "I'm safe," "I'm welcome," etc., one saying per speech output button. Place the relevant (matching speech with printed saying) speech output button on the circle on the relevant placemat. Place all of the mini icons into the sensory bin and cover with filler. Place bin in center of table and surround the bin with the placemats and buttons. Have students seek out the icons and add them to the rectangles on the matching sheet. For each time they place an icon, they push the speech output button. This teaches prayer as seeking, builds vocabulary about the faith, and provides lots of sensory feedback. It enables participation for all students who can move a hand through the bin. (Modification for people with mouth movement only: use a small fishtank net to find icons with the mouth.) Lesson can be repeated weekly or monthly.

Supplies List

- Large underbed storage bin
- Filler such as rose petals or beans or rice
- 3 each of these Legacy Icons Micro icons: Protection of the Holy Theotokos, St. John the Forerunner, Guardian Angel, Holy Trinity (Hospitality of Abraham, Christ and Theotokos micro icon set (red)
- Print outs
- 6 recordable speech output buttons
- 12 AAA batteries

approximate set up cost (retail): ~\$100
number of uses: hundreds
group size: 4-8 at a time
abilities needed for full experience:
gross motor ability, vision, hearing

SEPTEMBER GOSPELS , SAINTS' LIVES, AND CATECHISM

SEPTEMBER

Theme: The Holy Cross Tells Us God Loves Us and God Is With Us

As noted above, the best practice is to focus on one primary Gospel text for 2-3 weeks. This month flows perfectly into that pattern with three Sundays dedicated to the Cross (the Meaning of the Cross, the Crucifixion, Taking Up Your Cross), followed by the calling of the first disciples the last week of the month. You will focus on the first of the Gospel passages about the Cross, and from that you can build out to add on the others in an accessible way (shown in the stories and curriculum). For the final week of September, the calling of the disciples is a sensory-rich experience with fun options for acting out being “fishers of humans.”

For the Saturday monthly group event, I have prepared a special set of supportive tools on emotional regulation and prayer for a “Bear One Another’s Burdens” or “Be Like Simon of Cyrene” session. These tools can be used by families and the whole parish.

There are also saints’ lives scripts for the month that you can use as desired to add onto a lesson or to replace a lesson, as needed.

To start, introduce this sensory bin icon-matching prayer activity (linked here and included at the end of the September section), which will set the pattern for the year of learning that God is With Us. You can keep this out every week or pull it out the first Sunday of each month. Bringing it out as part of class as a regular practice will build predictability and help with understanding. You might also have this bin out at every All In Liturgy gathering. <https://summerkinard.com/2025/09/12/supporting-low-verbal-nonspeaking-students-at-church/>

Sunday Before Holy Cross Gospel: John 3:13-17

Gospel summary at a glance: God would heal and draw all people to Himself through conquering death when Jesus died on the Cross, as foreshadowed by God healing the people from snakebite in Moses' time through the uplifted sign of the serpent that had bitten them.

Gospel Text (Revised Standard Version):

13 No one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven, the Son of man. 14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." 16 For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

Materials: rubber snakes (at least three), silks or cloths for dress up, a pole/stick (can be a broomstick or detachable mop handle)

LINK to Story Sequence Images:

<https://www.freebibleimages.org/illustrations/yo-moses-serpent/>

Print out images for approximate # of students (Slides 4 through 10 are the most important ones) and have students hold them up in front of them, stepping into their place in line as their part of the story is read aloud.

ACT IT OUT:

If you have a rubber snake or even a scarf, act out putting the mean snakes on

a pole (can be a broom stick). If you have dress up clothes, have the kids dress up with scarves and pretend to walk in the desert.

The people with Moses were attacked by mean snakes that bit the people!

God told Moses to put an image of the snakes on a pole and to hold it up for people to see. When the people looked at the snake on the pole, God healed them from snakebite!

God used the thing that had hurt the people in order to heal them instead!

DRAWING (optional): Draw a stick with a snake at the top. Next to it, draw a processional cross.

FIELD TRIP (Optional): Go to the church and look at the crosses. If possible, ask if the Processional cross can be brought out. Why do we hold up the image of Christ on the Cross? It's because the Cross reminds us that Christ conquers death and heals us through His death.

Look at the Cross that's brought out for Pascha. Remind the students how they helped take down the Body at Deposition. Remind them of what we sing at Pascha.

Sing together: Christ is Risen! Christos Anesti!

Moses' story is part of a pattern with God. God is ALWAYS WITH US and LOVES US. So whatever is hardest for us, God will use that to heal us. Just like the God healed the people from snakebite when they looked at the snake, and Christ trampled down death by death on the Cross and was resurrected.

Speech output: Some things are hard! God is always with us and loves us.

Sunday of the Holy Cross Take-Home Lesson

Overview: Tell your children/family the story of the finding of the true and life-giving Cross. Using couch cushions or blankets and chairs, make a “church” in your house. Add a speech output button that says the Our Father. Bring an LED candle into your “church” to pray. If you used couch cushions, you can let your autistic child squish themselves under the cushions before you put everything back. This is a fun way to learn about the Holy and Life-Giving Cross even if you can’t make it into church for this [weekday] service.

Materials: Your couch cushions (or bean bag chairs and large pillows and cushions), an LED candle, printout of the Visual Lord’s Prayer, speech output button saying the Our Father, three similar crosses (can be tied together sticks, nothing fancy), optional dress up clothes for St. Helen (nice scarf and/or crown), the sick woman (a bandage for her head), and St. Macarius (a scarf over his shoulders like a stole, maybe a handheld cross if you have one). If you are only two people and need a “sick woman,” you may use a baby doll for her part.

Craft (optional): Using string/yarn and 6 sticks from the yard (3 longer, 3 shorter), tie together three crosses of similar sizes. If possible, use a different color of yarn for one of them or put a sticker or glitter on one of them.

Tell the story simply:

If you are using dress up clothes, whoever is playing St. Helen should put on their costume props.

St. Helen, Equal to the Apostles, found the Cross of Christ and the crosses of the two thieves crucified with Christ.

Show the three crosses you made. St. Helen holds them up.

She didn’t know which one of them belonged to the Lord.

Whoever is playing St. Macarius (optional) stands up and points at the crosses.

Her friend St. Macarius the Archbishop told her to bring a very sick lady to the crosses.

St. Macarius points at the sick lady. If you're using a doll for that part, he can lift the doll towards the crosses. If someone is playing the sick lady, that person should lie their head on the table or lie on the ground near the crosses.

When the lady got near to one of the crosses, she was immediately healed!

If a person is playing the sick lady, have them stand/sit up and take off the bandage.

That's how they knew which Cross was the Lord's. It was life-giving!

Everyone can rejoice/clap hands or whatever way you express happiness (flapping hands, etc).

Later, St. Helen built a church on the site of the Holy and Life-Giving Cross.

Let's build the church!

Lead your child to the cushions or indoor tent supplies you want them to use to build the church. Have them help you build a simple outline of a building. Place the holy cross from your skit inside, along with a candle. Say/speech output/point the Lord's prayer together.

After you pray, set the cross and candle on a table. You can allow your child to play in the cushions. If your child likes to be squished under the cushions, you can play "squish" gently with them, lightly smushing the cushions on their legs (or whatever is safe for them and you). Then you can put things away after you had a few minutes to play.

Note: If your child tries to use the couch cushions to make the church again this week, go with it. Set the cross and candle inside and pray with them, then let them play for a few minutes before resetting the cushions. You can tell them, "All Done for now," when it's time to stop playing.

First Sunday of Luke Gospel: Luke 5:1-11

(Last Sunday of September)

Gospel Summary at a Glance: Jesus calls Peter, James, and John to follow Him and become fishers of people.

Gospel Text (RSV):

⁵ While the people pressed upon him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennes'aret. ² And he saw two boats by the lake; but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. ³ Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. ⁴ And when he had ceased speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." ⁵ And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets." ⁶ And when they had done this, they enclosed a great shoal of fish; and as their nets were breaking, ⁷ they beckoned to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸ But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." ⁹ For he was astonished, and all that were with him, at the catch of fish which they had taken; ¹⁰ and so also were James and John, sons of Zeb'edee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be catching men." ¹¹ And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.

Materials: large decorative fishing net, 2 sensory canoes, fish toys or cut outs (if you cut fish out of polymailers, they can be reused at Pascha for the sign of Jonah lessons), print outs of the sequence, speech output button saying, "Jesus said, follow me and I will make you fish for people."

Story Sequence: Find it here or at the end of this section

Act it Out:

Read aloud the sequence as you post it. Then read it again while you act it out using the canoe, the net, and the fake fish. The kids might want to play in the canoe, and that's ok. At first see if you can get just two of them in the canoe to be Peter and Andrew.

Speech output: Follow me and I will make you fish for people.

Let the kids play with the canoes some more, and transition to singing when you're ready.

Week Two/build on it: How does God catch the world?

The kids will probably want to play in the sensory canoes the whole time because they will remember them. That's okay. They can experience the story from there.

Add to the materials this week: push light LED buttons for each child so they can register when they hear the words in the song.

Speech output button #1: Jesus said, Follow me and I will make you fish for people.

Speech output button #2: We catch people for God when we pray and act kindly like God.

Discussion:

Sometimes we only hear the first part of a story! Where did this story end?

Speech output button: Follow me and I will make you fish for people.

Wait a minute! Did Jesus want us to put people in nets? Let's see.

Act it out, putting teachers in nets. If kids want to participate, they can get in the silly net, too.

No! That's silly!

Wait a minute! This was only the beginning of the story! I remember something that happened with nets and the fishermen this summer at Holy Pentecost! Let's listen.

Sing this:

Blessed are You, O Christ our God. You sent down the Holy Spirit into the fishermen and You gave them knowledge and wisdom in everything; and through them, as in a net You caught the whole world. O Lord Who loves humanity, glory to You.

I thought I noticed something. Now I will sing it again. Raise your hand/push the light up button when you hear about fishermen or a net.

Blessed are You, O Christ our God. You sent down the Holy Spirit into the **FISHERMEN** and You gave them knowledge and wisdom in everything; and through them, as in a **NET** You caught the whole world. O Lord Who loves humanity, glory to You.

Wow! This story seemed to end with Jesus calling Simon Peter and Andrew, but it was only the beginning.

Have a teacher hold up the net.

Now how does God catch the world? Let's see. Would people go into the net if we are mean to them?

Shakes head, "no." Holds net up. Makes sour face. No one goes to it. Other teacher/parent could duck away from the net.

What if we are kind to people?

Teacher takes net to other helper, who allows them to catch them in the net (gently).

We are kind to people like God is kind, and we catch people!

What if we pray for people?

Teacher takes net to other helper, who allows them to catch them in the net (gently). A child might want to get caught at this point. Catch them.

We pray in church! Cool. We caught them.

What if we help people?

Teacher takes net to other helper, who allows them to catch them in the net (gently). A child might want to get caught at this point. Catch them.

Yes! Helping people is what God does. That catches people, too.

Press the buttons in this order:

Speech output button #1: Jesus said, Follow me and I will make you fish for people.

Speech output button #2: We catch people for God when we pray and act kindly like God.

Wait! What is the rest of the story?

Have the kids push the buttons again to tell the end of the story.

Speech output button #1: Jesus said, Follow me and I will make you fish for people.

Speech output button #2: We catch people for God when we pray and act kindly like God.

SEPTEMBER SAINTS' LIVES

Saint Phoebe (September 3)

Paul proclaimed you a protector of many/ and you did become his helper./ Hearken to those who approach you with faith/ and who cry out to you with love/ Rejoice glory of Corinth and pride of Achaia;/ rejoice you lamp of Cenchrea,/ rejoice, O Deaconess Phoebe. -Kontakion

Background:

Saint Phoebe the Deaconess is best known for being the person that St. Paul sent to teach the epistle to the Romans. She was a great teacher and helper in the building and encouraging and service of the early church. Because she was such a great teacher, she was remembered in the prayers as the lamp of Cenchrea.

When saints were great teachers, they are often remembered as “lamps,” because they shone the light God gave them like a lamp set on a stand that spread light far and wide.

What were deacons like in the Bible? We can see what they were like in the description of spiritual gifts in Romans 12. St. Paul knew that St. Phoebe would be teaching the letter, so he emphasized the spiritual gifts of the diaconate in the list he included in the letter.

Materials: St. Phoebe the Deaconess icon printout (free for noncommercial use from: <https://discerningdeacons.org/resource/st-phoebe-icon-suzanne-massie/>) or a mounted icon of St. Phoebe if you have one, scroll (at least 7 or 8 pages of paper taped together end to end and rolled, then tied with a ribbon),

silk to use as a headscarf, optional halo, LED push lights to turn on when you say the qualities of the deacon, printable of the lamps.

Speech output device: The Holy Spirit prays with us even when we don't have words.

Tell the Story:

Get out icon. Have someone dress up like St. Phoebe.

St. Phoebe the Deaconess was a great teacher. She told people about how God prays with each of us. She was such a great teacher that she was called a lamp!

Let's listen to how St. Phoebe served! Every time we name a way she was a lamp, push your light button!

(Get out the printable with the lamp. Read it aloud, pausing dramatically and pointing at the lamp each time a quality of her ministry is named.)

But most of all, St. Phoebe told people that God loves us no matter what. Even when we cannot speak, the Holy Spirit prays with us.

When we cry, "Abba! Father!" (like when we say the "Our Father,") it is the Holy Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.

St. Phoebe taught that, "The Holy Spirit prays for us with sighs too deep for words."

Speech output button: The Holy Spirit prays with us even when we don't have words.

You can end with singing or saying the kontakion to St. Phoebe.

St. Euphrosynos the Cook (September 11)

Materials: Peg dolls with a man's face drawn on, little sticks from outside with three branches on them, red Model Magic clay, crayons to color the man, icon of St. Euphrosynos

Model magic clay:

Blank peg dolls:

This lesson is simpler than most. It's a craft. While you tell the story: The kids make the apples from clay and stick them onto the sticks. They color the peg dolls. If you want, you can print this page out and send it home with red Model Magic packets for people to do at home with their families.

Ahead of time: Draw iconic faces on the peg dolls, enough for the kids plus one or two. Find enough sticks (plus one or two extras) for the branches.

After showing the kids how to make little round balls of clay to press onto the branches, read the story aloud while they work:

St. Euphrosynos the Cook is the saint holding a branch with three apples whose icon hangs in so many Orthodox Christian kitchens. This saint started as a top notch luxury chef in the big city, where he only ate simple foods despite his access to rich feasts each day. Even then, his goal was to feast on the presence of God rather than focusing on the delights of the stomach. When he joined a monastic community as their cook, he only cooked plain dishes despite his great skills; for this he was mocked as a poor and simple cook, which mockery he bore without complaint. Meanwhile he continued in prayer, seeking heavenly food. One of the priests in his monastery had prayed to God to experience a taste of paradise. After many years, one night his prayers were granted. In the first sleep of the night between compline and midnight prayers, the priest entered a dreamlike vision, wherein he walked in a garden and orchard filled with delightful fruits and fragrances. He saw

there to his surprise the simple cook, Euphrosynos, whom the priest had mocked as simple and ignorant of good food. Now it seemed that Euphrosynos was in fact at home in the garden of God's presence. The priest asked Euphrosynos for help in receiving some of the fruits growing there, so Euphrosynos picked a branch with three apples and placed it in the priest's outer garment. Suddenly the priest was awakened to the midnight prayers, and when he put on his outer garment, the apples were there! Euphrosynos, in humility, fled the monastery so that he would not be praised for his spiritual heights. The apples cured many who were sick. His story is in the kitchen so we remember that whether we cook plain or feasting foods, the goal is to dwell in the presence of God and to feast on the love of God.

Materials List for St. Irenaeus Apostolic Succession Catechism Lesson:

Silicone silly strings: <https://amzn.to/4gUthK9>

Print out

Make a martyr crown for the three who were martyred with laurel garland:

Turn on an LED push light for each little lamp



**St. Phoebe the Deaconess was like a lamp.
She served the Church with spiritual gifts like:**



Prophesying

(Applying the Scriptures to Comfort)



Serving (Deaconing)



Teaching



Encouragement



Giving money



Giving aid

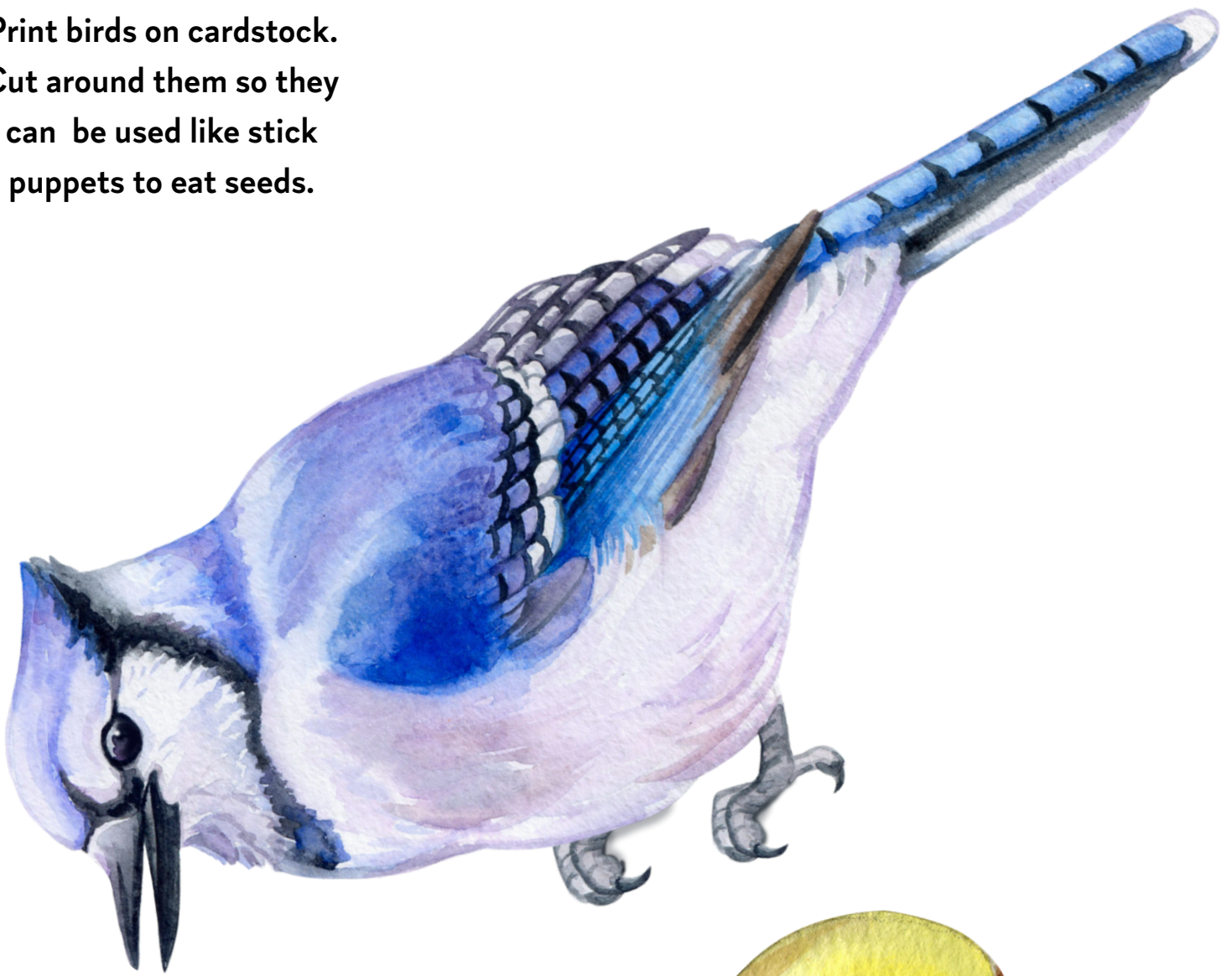


Acting with mercy



Print birds on cardstock.
Cut around them so they
can be used like stick
puppets to eat seeds.

Print birds on cardstock.
Cut around them so they
can be used like stick
puppets to eat seeds.



Print birds on cardstock.
Cut around them so they
can be used like stick
puppets to eat seeds.

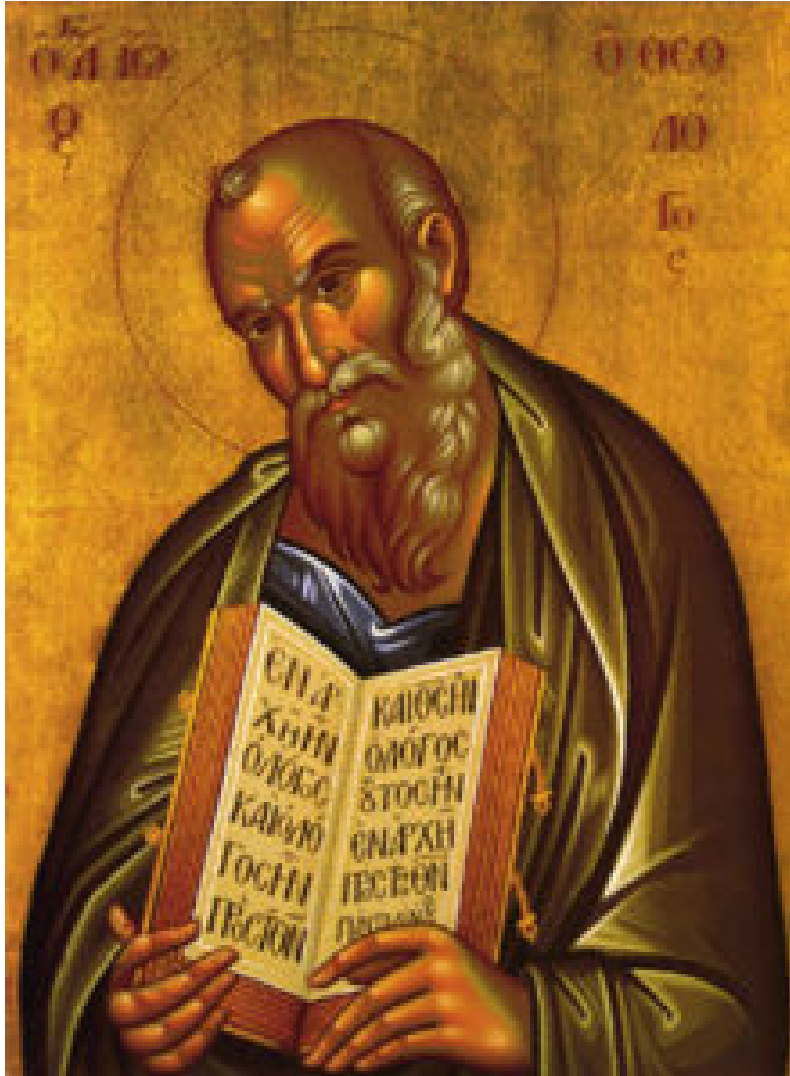




Our Lord Jesus taught

speech output button: Our Lord Jesus taught St. John the Evangelist, who taught St. Polycarp, who taught St. Irenaeus.





St. John the Evangelist who taught

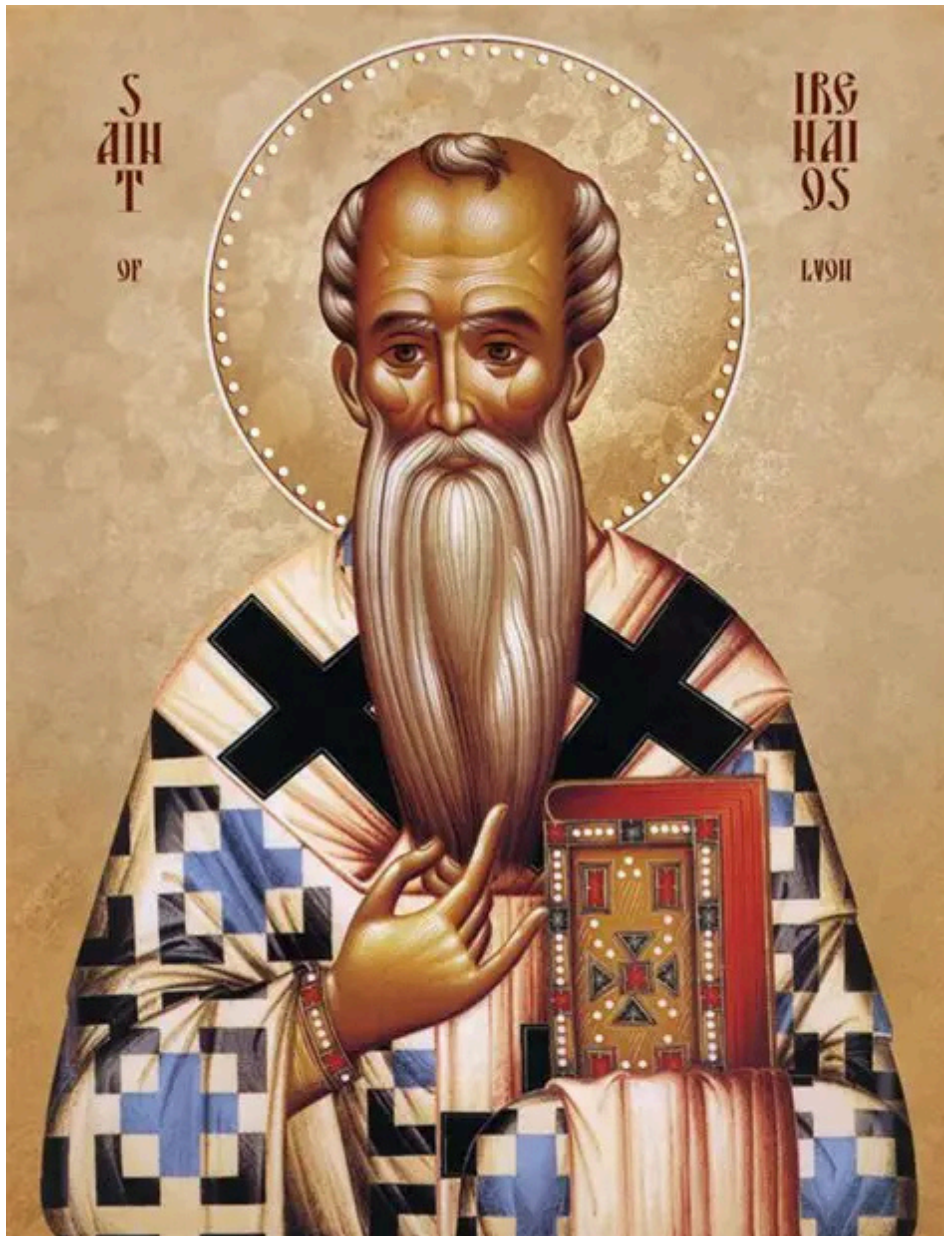


May 8



St. Polycarp who taught





St. Irenaeus.



The teachings of Christ were passed down through the Apostles to their disciples. The Holy Spirit helps each generation to know what to teach truly.

Optional game: Play “telephone” by saying to the first person in line, “Christ is Lord to the Glory of God the Father.” If nonspeaking, have someone record it, then between the people push the record button and mess it up. You want the first round to not work.

Explain: Usually when we have a message passed between a lot of people, it gets messed up. But with God, the Holy Spirit and the whole Church intervene to set the message straight, so when we make a mistake, it gets fixed.

Round Two: How the Church Passes down traditions

This time, tell the phrase to the first person. Then tell it to the second person. If using speech output, re-record the button with the right phrase between people as needed, making sure to “accidentally” mess up the recording once.

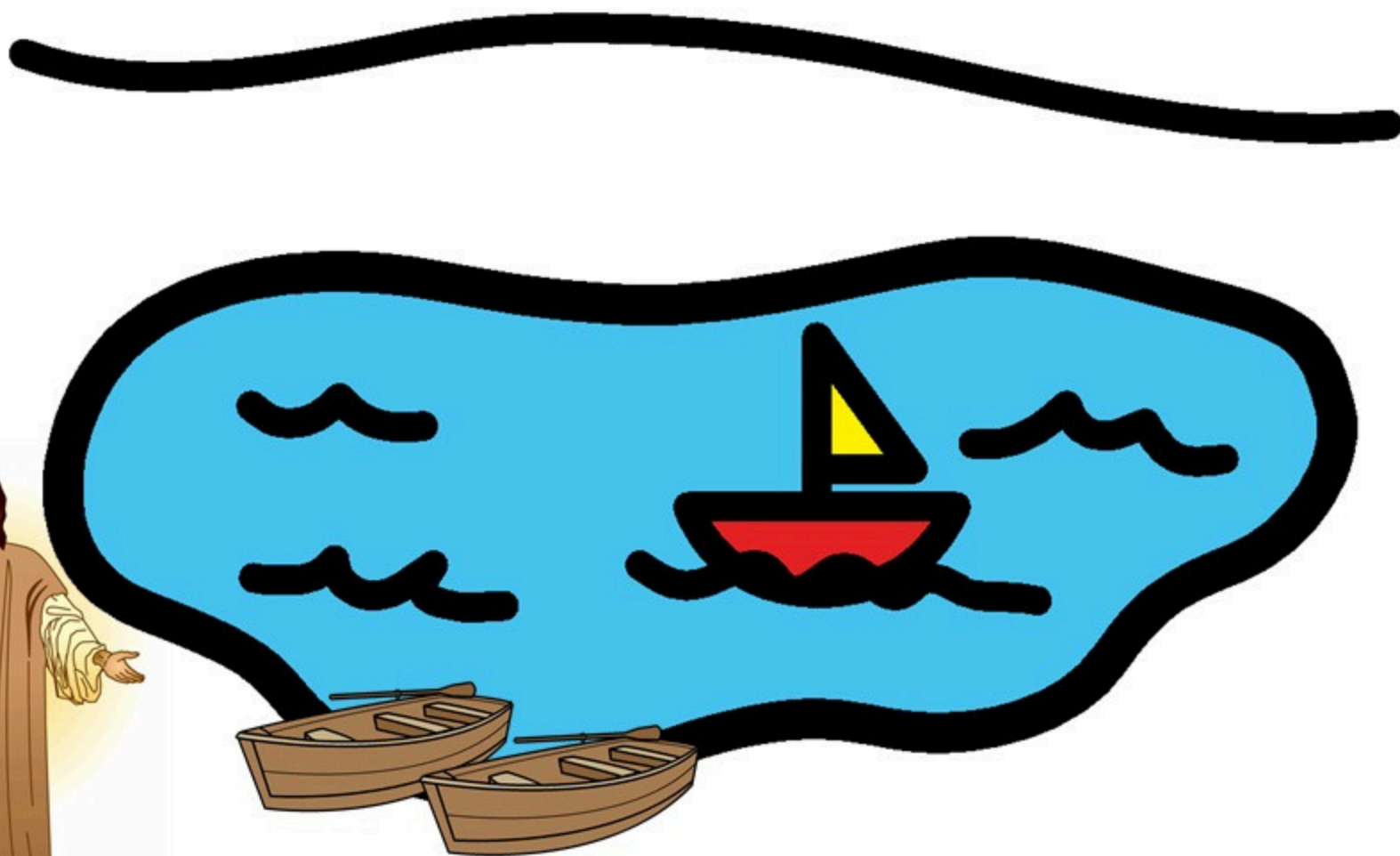
In the Church, we have a chance to make things right when we make mistakes. God sends the Holy Spirit to guide us through our Bishops and all the people, to put us back on track even if we mess up.



St. Irenaeus taught that Mary the Theotokos was the Second Eve and untied the knots of Eve's sin. An early title we have for the Theotokos is the Undoer of Knots.

Materials: Icon of Holy Theotokos, silicone sensory strings, Speech output button:
Most Holy Theotokos, Save us!

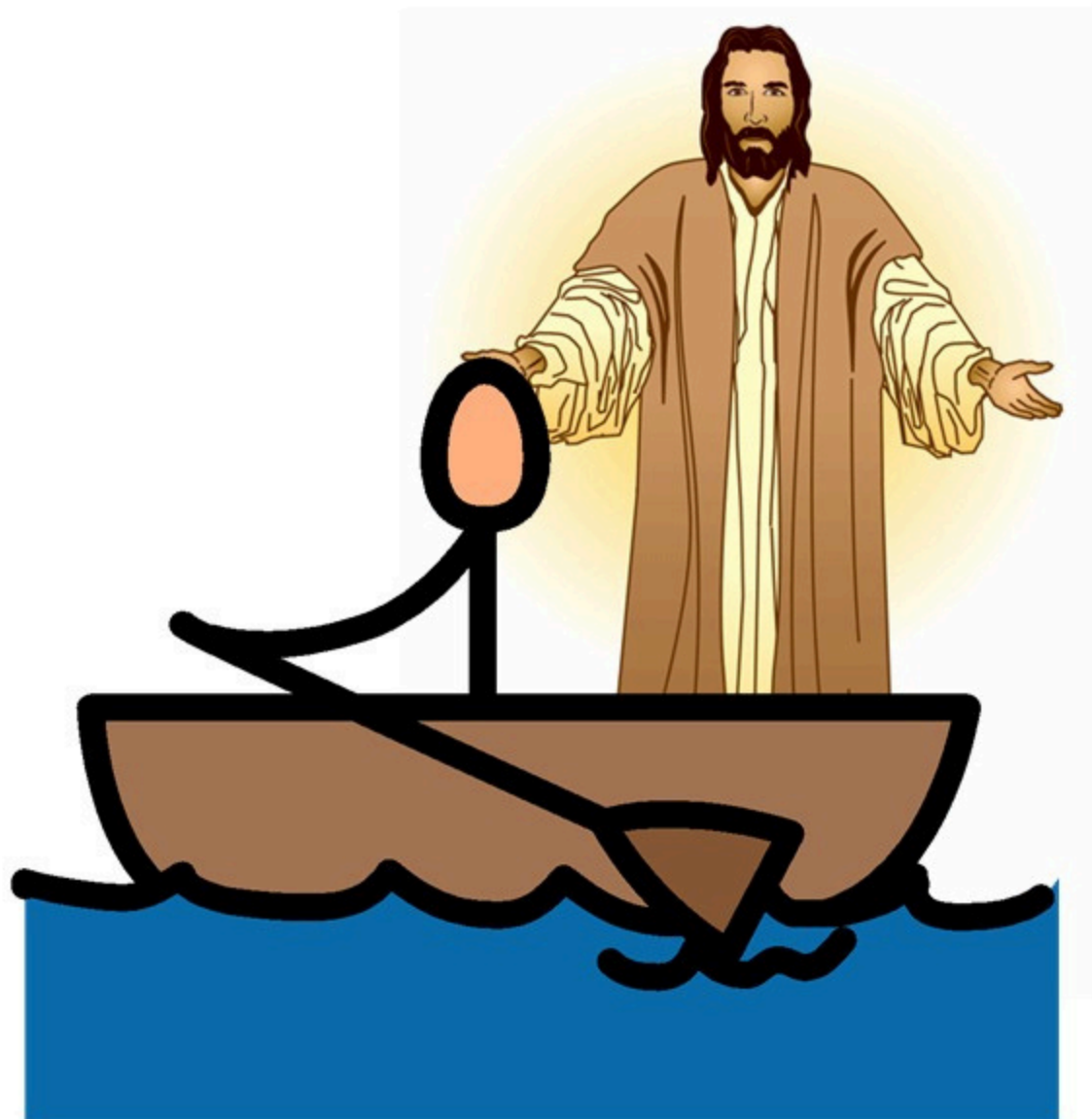
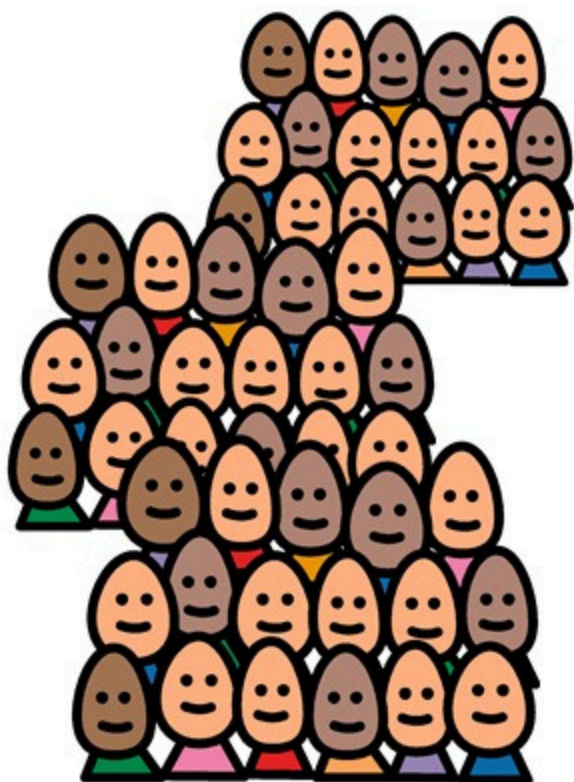
GAME: Tie silicone sensory strings in knots before class. Take turns pushing the speech output button asking the Theotokos for help, then try to untie the knots.



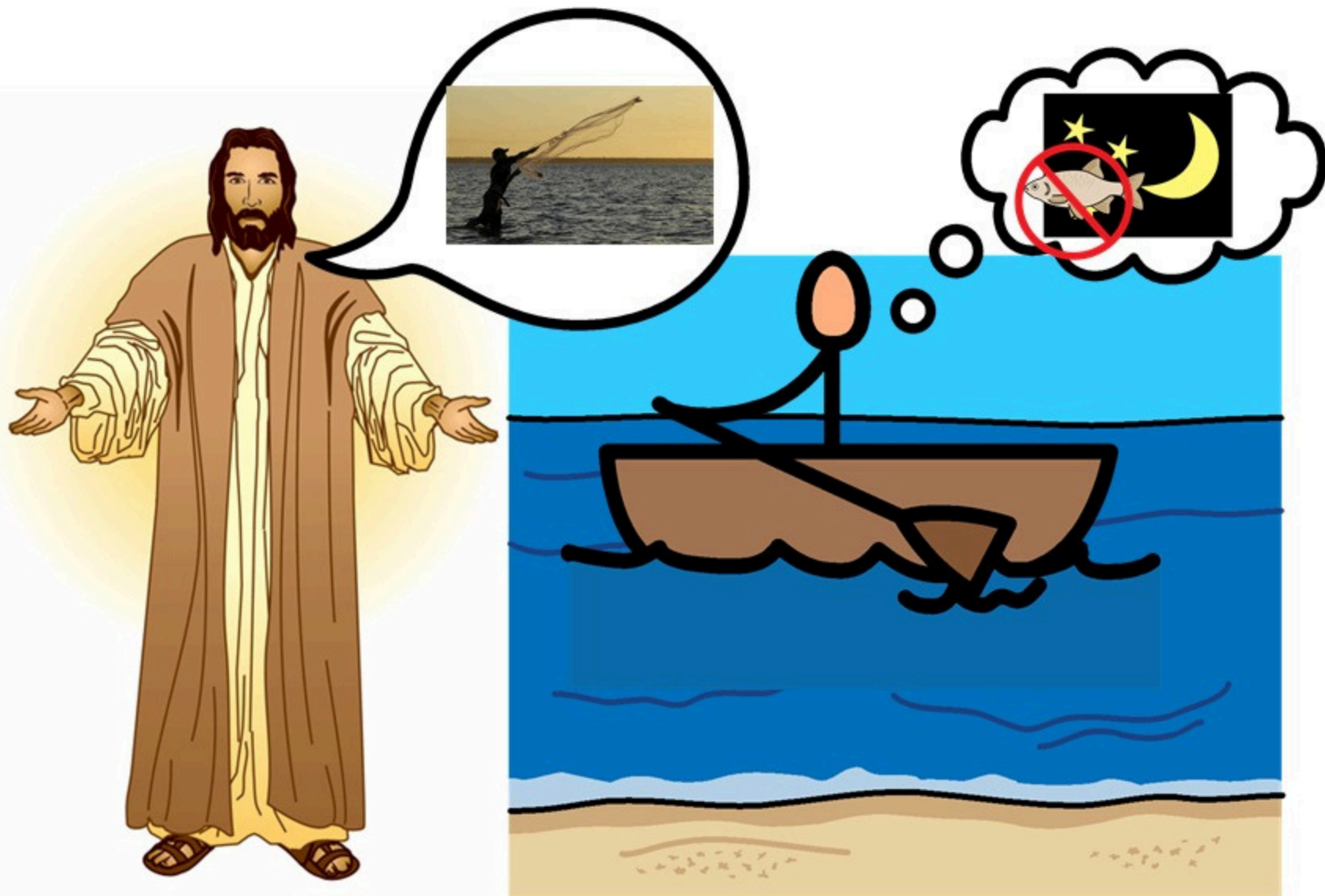
Jesus was teaching by the Lake of Gennes'aret when He saw two boats on the shore.



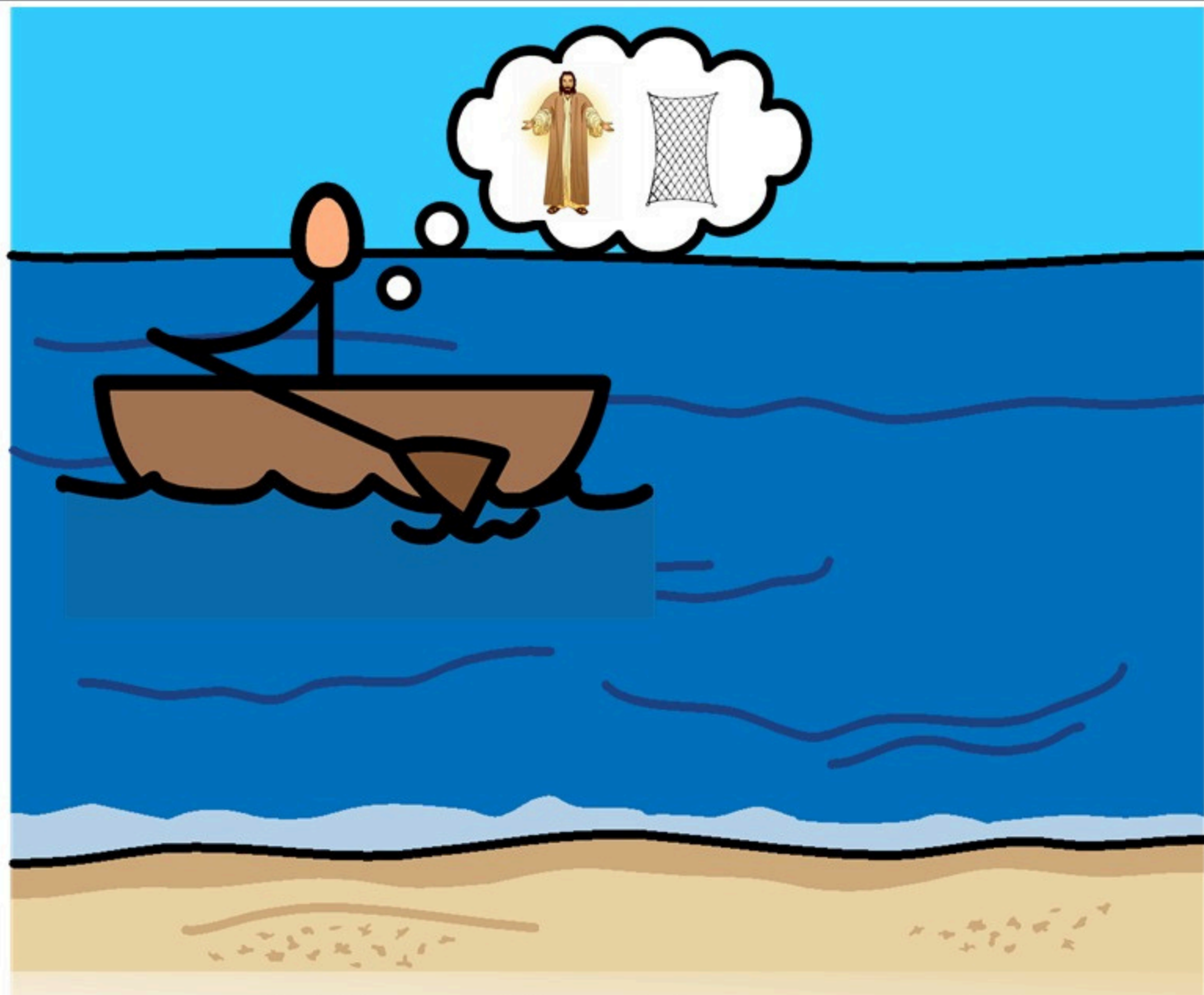
Jesus got into Simon's boat and asked him to row out a little.



Jesus taught the people from the boat.



When Jesus finished teaching, He told Simon to cast his nets in deep water. Simon said they fished all night and caught no fishes.



But Simon cast the nets because Jesus asked.

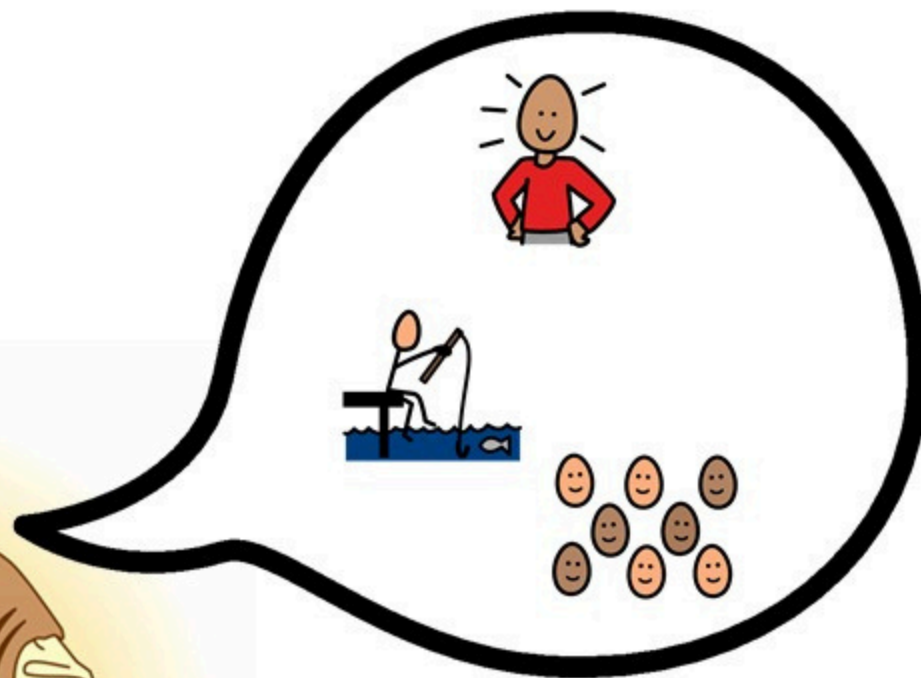


When they had cast their nets, the nets were so full of fishes that they had to call the other boat to help. Both boats were so full of fish that they were sinking!

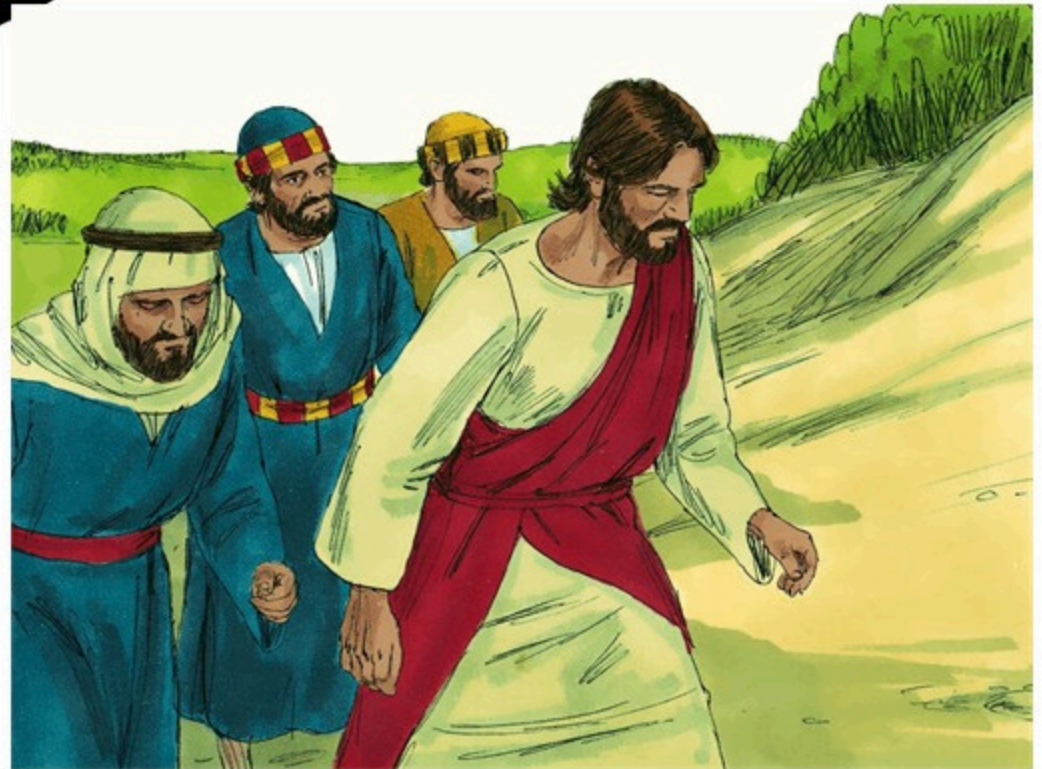
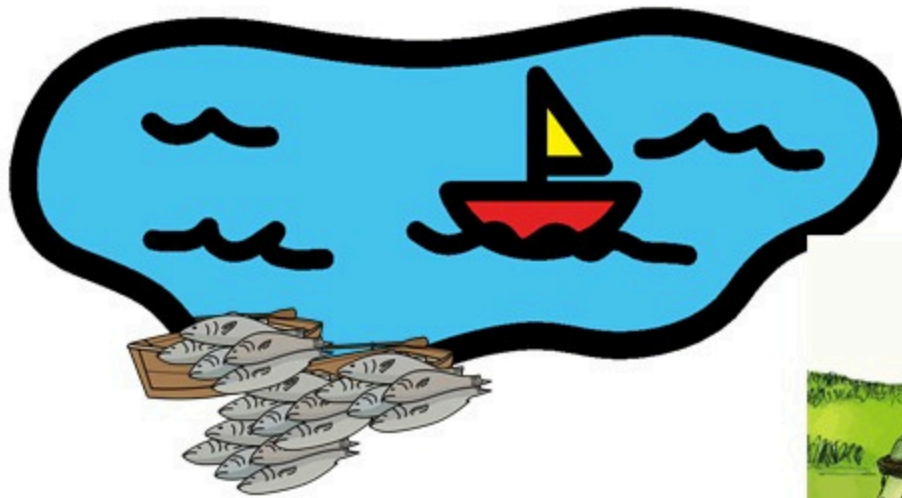


When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees and said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."

Peter and James and John, sons of Zeb'edee, who were partners with Simon, were all astonished at how many fish they had caught.



But Jesus said, "Don't be afraid. From now on, you will be catching people."



When Peter, James, and John had brought their boats ashore, they left everything and followed Jesus.

Elements to Consider for an All-In Liturgy

We have great examples of ongoing All-In and inclusive liturgies and gatherings in the Orthodox Christian communities in Astoria, New York and Des Plaines/Chicago, Illinois. Those churches have practiced inclusive services and gatherings for years! This short list is not meant to impinge on their excellent example but rather to offer an overview of some best practices for inclusion for those considering implementing an inclusion ministry for families with disabilities and all members.

Scheduling in the Afternoon

Morning services are challenging for many families and persons with disabilities for several reasons.

1. Pain-somnia and Morning Aches & Pains: People whose disabilities cause chronic pain often have difficulty sleeping at night and experience heightened pain in the mornings as well. Sometimes medications that manage pain are taken at night to allow for sleep, which can make for a lag in attentiveness and wakefulness in the morning hours that make driving unwise. A later start time allows for people to manage their pain levels safely and to drive without impairment due to medication side effects or sleep deprivation.
2. Blind people often have schedules that vary from the typical sighted day/night routine, and many blind people do not wake early. There are some sleep disorders that are specific to blind people as well. A family with a blind person whose schedule runs later in the day might adapt to their needs, including shift work and modified sleep schedules. Often an

afternoon time allows for fewer barriers to attendance. Many blind people also rely on transportation services that can be easier to schedule in the afternoon or on weekdays. Ask your blind members about their needs when you are planning your schedule.

3. Autism, ADHD, and other neurological differences can cause people with those disabilities, especially children and teens, to keep very late night sleep hours. Parents who stay up to care for children into the early hours of the morning will not be able to safely drive to an early church service, and sleep deprived autistic families will have a high probability of becoming overwhelmed or dysregulated and having to leave if they are able to attend a morning service.
4. Caregivers often adapt their work schedules to late night shift work in order to support their disabled family members since the care support they receive is usually during the day shift hours. A late afternoon service will allow many families to attend who might not otherwise be able to do so due to the accommodations they have made to support their disabled families.

Don't Put the Owl Kids In the Front Rows

Officious adults and children often sit in the front row or two rows of church services, and they turn around and stare like owls at autistic kids throughout the service. This is usually more prominent a habit when the children are younger, but even adults and teens do this rather a lot. Autistic children usually do not like being stared at; in fact, they might yell or scream or try to leave. You might consider making room for the autistic children in the front rows instead of people who feel like they are the standards of behavior or people who will stare at others who appear unusual.

Casual Dress Code

Autistic children and families with disabilities don't dress "down" out of disrespect but due to sensory needs. If you make it clear that the expectation for church garb is sleeves, covered knees (if that's your custom), and cleanliness rather than formality, it will encourage families to attend whose disabled children's needs lead them to wear loose sweatshirts and soft joggers, for instance, rather than a suit or button downs with slacks or skirts/dresses. Many families with disabilities need adaptive clothing due to their disabilities and feeding tubes. Because of the nature of disabilities, sometimes the "nice" set of adaptive clothing gets soiled so that it's not available for Sunday mornings. A "come as you are" approach to dress code can help inclusive gatherings to be much more accessible for many families.

Invite Them in Person

This responsibility should not fall on clergy primarily but on the people. The church staff should print cards and flyers and note the accessible and inclusive options in the bulletin and have them available at the candle stand, and the people should be encouraged to invite each other and absent community members to the inclusive gatherings and Divine Liturgy. Web searches are not as effective as members making social media posts with little one minute videos inviting people, telling them the time and date (with captions and the time, date, and location in the description) and expressing welcome. Even better, let members know that their friends and family will be accommodated, and ask them to visit in person or call their disabled community members to invite them. The Team Ups page gives an example of how members of your church disability community can team up to invite people and let them know about upcoming services during coffee hour.

Incense for Respiratory Safety

Many health conditions and disabilities make breathing incense difficult or even dangerous. You can mitigate most of the negative medical effects of incense use with a few modifications that will allow people with lung health considerations to participate.

1. Light charcoal outside the sanctuary. Allow the charcoal to fully light so that its accelerant burns off. The accelerant, not the incense or charcoal, cause an irritating smoke that can endanger people with medical conditions and disabilities.
2. Use non-powdered, full resin incense such as frankincense, myrrh, and blends with those two standards and nard. The unpowered incense burns cleaner, with very little irritating smoke. Pure frankincense is usually considered the least irritating of all incense.
3. Use less incense for the censer use outside the Altar, according to any limits set by your hierarch.
4. Set up portable HEPA filters in one area and don't cense it directly. This might not work on a usual Sunday, but it can help for people with severe conditions at inclusive services.

Abbreviated Divine Liturgy

The shorter version of the service, without the repeated prayers, can reduce a 2 hour service to a little over an hour.

Liturgical Movements Outside the Altar

Many disabled children pay attention best when they have a participatory element to look forward to. For some boys with disabilities, Altar service is an option. But for many of them, their support needs make Altar service inside

the Altar untenable. An option for inclusive liturgy might be to allow boys with higher support needs to carry LED candles, to sit in the front row rather than in the Altar, and to participate in the processions of the Small and Great Entrance, then sit back outside the Altar. This allows them to leave the service if they need to without disruption as well.

For girls, the custom of bringing up flowers to the Holy Theotokos in the iconostasis might be an option to allow them to participate in a movement activity with visible contribution. Being able to participate visibly is more accessible to the attention needs of disabled girls than being asked only to stand in place and pray. They will believe more easily that they are also full members if they are allowed to bring up an offering to the solea/iconostasis, as abstraction is not part of the ability set of many people with disabilities. Having something physical to bring, like flowers, gives them an attention anchor to the service along the same lines as the attention anchors for boys, but without confusion.

For all children, the Sunday of Orthodoxy is an accessibility highlight. They get to participate in the procession, and it feels like (and is) a very big deal. If there are icons to be blessed that week/month, consider allowing any child who wishes to process up at an appropriate time to the solea to hand the icons to the priest. This will have the effect of reminding the children of the Sunday of Orthodoxy on other months, reinforcing the memory and helping to generalize the importance of their role as Orthodox Christians who venerate holy icons.

Visual Schedule for the Divine Liturgy

Using a visual schedule for the Divine Liturgy gives movement and attention cues to people who need executive functioning, audio processing, language,

sensory, and communication supports. The size of 8.5"x11" paper with checkboxes is part of what makes it accessible; too small, and it limits participation by people with visual and motor impairments. Likewise the format of a visual schedule with images is vital; you cannot achieve the same level of executive function and other support with a book or a written list or a game or path. Being able to see the current step of the group plan quickly and in context is important. You can print these and check them off, laminate them and use wipe away markers, use replaceable paper versions with stickers, or laminate them, add soft side Velcro to the pages, and track with a laminated image with sticky side Velcro that can move along the steps.

<https://summerkinard.com/2020/01/16/new-and-improved-visual-schedule-for-the-orthodox-divine-liturgy/>

Visual Lord's Prayer (Our Father)

People who use AAC, whether they are nonspeakers or speakers who need AAC support to follow along, will be able to participate in the Our Father by pointing at the images even if they are not able to speak or read words.

<https://summerkinard.com/2025/04/25/visual-lords-prayer/>

Gluten-Free Body

At the 2025 pan-Orthodox conference, "Gathered as One Body: Disability, Accessibility, and Inclusion in the Orthodox Church," His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros advised us that there are no canons against gluten-free Communion bread, as people did not know about gluten during the time when the canons were composed. A recipe for oil-free, gluten-free, soy-free bread was used at the Hierarchical Divine Liturgy for the conference.

Another option for people with celiac and severe food allergies to wheat is to have an unmixed cup set aside or one with the smallest crumb of the Body. This custom of setting aside a Blood Only chalice, if observed during Lent as well, would allow celiac and wheat allergic members to participate by partaking of the Blood only in presanctified Divine Liturgy, which is otherwise quite dangerous for them due to the prolonged mixture of the Gifts between Sunday morning and Wednesday night.

An Icon Walk with Action Prayers

Knowing that many children with disabilities will need to move around more than only in their small area or pew, the church might set up a devotional icon walk through the hallways of the church, with an interaction at each station. For instance, they might already light a candle at the icons in the Narthex. In addition, perhaps have in the hallway or even the parish hall an icon of the Holy Theotokos with a little basket of flowers and a vase so that the children can place a flower from the basket into the vase when they step out of church. Another station might be a St. Nicholas icon with a little basket of quarters and an alms box, so the children can practice giving coins to the poor like St. Nicholas. The icon walk doesn't need to be long and perhaps shouldn't be. It is a way to allow for movement that is meaningful and prayerful and points back into the Divine Liturgy, where the child and family will be rejoining as soon as they are able.

Social Inclusion in Coffee Hour

Coffee hour is too loud and chaotic for many people with disabilities, and communication challenges and limitations can make it even more difficult to participate. The challenges for participating as a person with disabilities include volume, difficulties deciphering speech with a background roar,

crowding, unpredictable movements, food allergies, feeding tubes and other feeding differences (such as needing to not turn one's head when one is chewing to avoid choking), lack of AAC, lack of sign language, unpredictable obstacles to navigate by touch, unscripted conversations, unscripted interactions, unclear social expectations, reliance on questions rather than declarative language in typical social interactions, being stared at, being ignored, being treated as an object of pity, being spoken down to or past, not having physical access to a table, being jostled, having no way to form a meaningful connection with other people, being looked at with suspicion or disdain or disgust, not having accessible toileting options. These challenges are all solvable problems, thanks be to God!

Well-spaced, predictable tables will make navigating the space easier for people with balance and vision impairments. It can also help people avoid jostling if ample space is available. For Sundays, if the crowd is dense, a separate room might be required to put accessible best practices into place.

If there is a single-stall toilet available, let families with disabilities know so that they can use it as needed to assist family members.

Label foods when possible. Have a separate area for allergen-safe foods, and ask that the ingredients be labeled.

Provide a food-free activity table where people with severe allergies can interact without getting food on them.

Have an ongoing project table in a side room or to the side, with group projects like a large religious art banner to color in with paint sticks, puzzles, and a community "We Belong to Each Other and to God" Polaroid puzzle (could be wall mounted). An Inclusion puzzle with Polaroids of each person present makes a visible, trackable statement that everyone is included. People

can find themselves on the puzzle for the year, and a new puzzle can be started the next liturgical year. (You can also have people with motor control decorate a piece with their special interests and add their name, but photos are more inclusive. For a visual impairment accommodation, you can add Braille dots to spell the names.) Puzzle pieces like these:

<https://amzn.to/4qzCnzo> Polaroid like this set: <https://amzn.to/3Sn7dhK> Film like this: <https://amzn.to/4xdN8db> Braille/tactile dots like these: <https://amzn.to/4g9rBfA>

For inclusive gatherings, having stations with different types of activities available at each can be a big help. The gathering part of the All-In Ministry at St. John the Baptist has gross motor activities in one area of the gym where they meet and tables with different sensory fidget and activity options like coloring and crafts. That can work well if you have space. For Sunday mornings and gatherings in smaller spaces, you might consider some of the following options:

1. Label tables with fandoms or special interests. This can be specific fandoms like Spider-Man, Lord of the Rings, Bluey, Barbie, Paw Patrol, Warriors book series, Wings of Fire, Ms. Rachel, and other interests you know might be loved by your people. It can also be general, such as topography/biomes: Forests, Oceans, Lakes, Deserts.
2. Have a show and tell table with a few assistants who can help describe items and record speech output buttons for people who need help. Have a time set aside in the gathering for each person to hold up what they brought and read/speech output the description.

3. Have a sorting table with open sorting options. For instance, you can have peg dolls of different saints and Bible characters, play food, play fish, and toy animals. Have some grouping ideas printed out, like, “Which saints fed the hungry?” or “Who are the fishermen?” You can also make it very general, like mammals and fish and trees and toy stones and peg doll people who might be around them (Jonah and the fish; St. Herman of Alaska and trees; St. Nektarios and stones [for building a monastery]).
4. This can be a way for you to play a fun learning game, too, at events or in Sunday school. For instance, if you have the 12 disciples, St. Naucratus, and you have a category for Fishermen Saints, people can sort the peg dolls for Peter, Andrew, James, and John. They might not know about St. Naucratus, so you can teach them! (To make it easier, you might add a little fish to the peg dolls of the fishermen saints.) For Saints Who Fed the Hungry, include St. Martha and St. Mary of Bethany, St. Lucia, St. Casilda, and St. Mother Maria of Paris. You could also have any of the men or women disciples, as they helped distribute food when Jesus fed the 5,000. Another popular category might be animals and saints who were their friends, like St. Seraphim of Sarov and his bear, St. Abigail and her bees, St. Genevieve of Paris and her cat, St. Gerasimus and his lion, St. Cuthbert and his birds, St. Patrick and his sheep, and so on.
5. Use prepackaged sorting card games like Ouisi, which is made for inclusive groups and even has an option for memory care patients:
<https://shop.ouisi.co/products/ouisi-nature-set>

No matter the type of gathering, include baskets or trays of sensory fidgets that are safe for the attendees. For instance, you can have Model Magic

packets, Feelzies squishy bracelets, other squishy fidgets, Mozi fidgets, Rainbow Twirler iridescent spinners, Wiggly worm fidgets in bowls, Morphs, and squishy fake breads.

When it comes to social scripting, which is a major barrier, you can overcome many of the challenges with the above options, which provide structure as well as open-ended creativity. But what about what to actually SAY to each other, especially if speaking is a challenge? That's where simple games come in.

1. You can do assisted charades, with props that are set out on a table. For instance, have a hat with orange and yellow clear wrap added on top so it looks like flames. Have prompts, with images, set out to act out: candle (on head or in hand), Pentecost (on head), campfire (on floor), Burning Bush (holding it up in front of you or wearing it on head, pretending to be tree, etc). You might also have a play silk and doll and act out different holy people, like angels (pretend the silk is wings), the people who lowered their friend through the roof (put doll in silk and lower to floor), Mary the Mother of God and baby Jesus (wear as headscarf and hold baby or use as baby blanket on doll), Christ blessing children (wear as robe and bless the doll).
2. Have prompt games like "Would You Rather?" where people can raise their hands or push a light up button to make their choice. For instance, "Would you rather bang a drum or move to a drum?" Then add the modification by repeating with a prompt, "Raise your hand/push the light if _____. Raise your hand/push the light if _____." People could push their light button or raise their hand. They are part of a conversation this way even if they can't speak or move easily.

3. Play repetition games that go around a circle with rhythm, like “This is a ____.” That game goes along in a rhythm as so, with the group passing an object around. The object can be a block or a cup or anything, but each person will make up something to call it. Person One says, “This is a ____.” Person Two asks, “A what?” Person One replies, “A ____.” Person Two repeats, “A what?” Person One replies, “A ____.” Person Two says, “Oh, a ____.” Then Person Two makes up something and begins the exchange with the next person along the table. For instance, if you were passing around a drinking straw, the exchange might go like this:
 - a. “This is a wormy.” A what? “A wormy.” A what? “A wormy.” Oh! A wormy.
 - b. This is a straw. A what? A straw. A what? A straw. Oh! A straw.
 - c. This is pickle. A what? A pickle. A what? A pickle. Oh! A pickle.
 - d. This is a flute. A What? A flute. A what? A flute. Oh! A flute.
 - e. A speech output button could be recorded ahead of time to say, “A what?” and another to say, “Oh! A {pause}.” The whole group could speak up to fill in the pause if a student using the speech output buttons could not say the last word. Or they could just point at it.
4. The Team-Ups for Inclusion offer simple script options for communicating.
5. You can make up little prompted conversation groups if you have hostesses who know how to direct conversations with declarative language rather than questions, along with cards or objects to respond to prompts while playing with kinetic sand or clay or Duplos. For instance, if Ms. Helen were sitting with a small group, she might say, “I really like the shape this cylinder makes with the sand. Jimmy, I see that

you used the cylinder. I like that. If you'd like, please let us all see it. Oh, you want to keep it to yourself. That's okay! Here's the one I made. I will pass the cylinder to the middle for another person to try." Or she might say, "Wow. I love making tables from these blocks. I wish I had a big table in my house that I could put together and take apart so easily. Let's make tables." And later, "Let's see how high we can stack our Duplos." This semi-directed play where people can reference each other if they want but not have to respond to questions provides a low demand social option that can help a lot for people easily frustrated by conversation attempts.

Don't Water Down Teaching. Raise the Supports.

Sometimes caregivers assume that the only way to teach anything is to use curricula meant for babies, but the true challenges are usually HOW people teach, not what they teach. Consider supported saints' lives and Bible stories as your main content, and use a high support needs curriculum like the ***God With Us High Support Sunday School*** (in which this guide is included) to help you engage students of all abilities. <https://summerkinard.com/god-with-us-high-support-sunday-school/>

Listen to the People with Disabilities & Their Family Members

If someone mentions that there was a challenge, work to find a solution that will actually work for them. Disabled adults can often help with overcoming challenges because they are used to doing so. If someone says they cannot sit/stand/wait, don't assume they will be able to do so if you wish it. If they say they would love to be part of the community but are going through a very difficult time with higher support needs than usual, find a way to reach out to them. If a parent tells you their child is not sleeping, don't schedule your one

alternative to Sunday Divine Liturgy on another morning. The child who can't sleep Saturday night probably can't sleep on Wednesdays, either.

Listen to the patterns that families bring up, and learn about the needs that are most common with disabilities. Help people understand that you are happy to accommodate these medical needs. For instance, postural coordination and stability challenges are common with a wide variety of disabilities, including some you might not expect like ADHD and autism. If you know this, you won't expect that someone with those disabilities will "grow out" of the need to move in services or to sit more often than others.

When families with disabilities tell you what gives them joy and what made them feel loved, do more of that!

Preparation and Training for When You Can't Attend on Sunday

A couple of times a year, perhaps during the Nativity Fast and Great Lent, teach people in person and over email about prayers they can pray at home and suggest practices they can use at home when they are unable to attend on Sundays due to disabilities. It can be confusing to have disabilities suddenly eject your family from the usual Divine Liturgy and to be told to "pray the Typica." What's a Typica? Who says what? If the disabled family members can't pay attention to the new and unfamiliar prayers, is there a lower-entry starting point?

Rather than only giving the advice that families should take up an unfamiliar practice, offer suggestions for incorporating prayers that have supports they can use at home. For instance, since they have a visual "Our Father," they can pray the Our Father together, then add a prayer for one or two other families with disabilities. If it's safe to use candles in their home, they might light a prayer candle, or they can turn on LED candles on Sundays. They can sing the

parish patron hymn, which they hear every Sunday at church. Perhaps you can suggest they listen to chants, or (especially if audio processing differences makes that difficult) nature sounds or watch videos of nature for 15 or 20 minutes. If they can go outside to an accessible park or sit on their porch, that can also be a good Sunday custom. It can also be nice to pick flowers from the yard to set by the icons on Sunday, or to buy flowers if it's in the budget.

Thanking God for the natural world and asking God's care for all creation is part of the Divine Liturgy; on days when families have to be away, connections with the natural world can help them remember their connection to the whole Body praying.

Keeping the Sabbath holy can also include making a special meal or food. It doesn't have to be elaborate, but having a special routine even when they cannot attend Sunday services can set the day apart. If the family with disabilities is able to fast (which for many is not the case for medical reasons), they might keep their habit by waiting until just after usual Communion time to have brunch together at home. That way if they are able to return to services, they will not have lost their conditioning to wait for breakfast on Sundays.

Inclusion Team-Ups

Exercising Spiritual Gifts Together

The Calling of the Disciples & Christian Service

The end of September shows us the calling of the first disciples. They were not called alone. When Christ sent the disciples out, He sent them in pairs. When we see Christ working with His disciples, they are usually in groups. Team-Ups are a way to include everyone socially while also allowing everyone to participate in serving one another in love, like Christ showed us in the disciples. Team-Ups focus on pairs and smaller groups of 3 or 4, so they are not overwhelming. They provide a built-in script for behavior and speech (if needed), and they can work with as many accommodations for physical disabilities as needed.

The Problem with the Assigned Buddy Model

Sometimes when churches are beginning a ministry to families with disabilities, they read what seems at first to be good advice: Assign a volunteer buddy to each child with disabilities. The buddy is supposed to be the social lubricant to include the child with disabilities. A lot of megachurch Protestant congregations advocate for this model, but they leave out some information, such as the fact that many of them pay their volunteers, that even when they don't pay the buddies, they have large paid staffs who train and oversee them, that they have staffed infrastructures like sensory rooms, indoor and/or extensive fenced playgrounds, cafes, away rooms, and dedicated paid disability ministry staff members and pastors. Without those infrastructure options, the "buddy" model leads to almost immediate coordinator and volunteer overwhelm and volunteer burnout within three to six months. Even

without these issues, the idea of assigning a pretend friend is not a best practice.

What works instead?

Orthodox churches don't generally have advanced physical and staff infrastructure in place for disability ministry, but what we do have is a culture that centers inclusion in a familial way. If you go to a coffee hour and see a group of children moving around and playing together, you might think they are siblings. Ask, and you'll likely find that some are cousins, some are godfamily, and some are in Greek dance together. Likewise, we have fairly consistent patterns of coffee hour fellowship. These elements give us an organic model of social inclusion in church time that doesn't tax coordinators or volunteers, is more inclusive, and incidentally actually teaches the exercise of spiritual gifts in the Body of Christ. (Outside of church time, pareas [friend groups] are a great option. This section is about inclusion in coffee hour through service.)

Service Team-Ups

Rather than expecting kids to "be friends" at church, instead think of inclusion through acts of loving service. Here's how they would work: For one event or lesson, ask an older abled peer to pair up with a child with disabilities (with their support person coming along as needed). They will complete a specific task, act out a specific skit in a lesson, and then the commitment is over. If they liked the team up, they can volunteer again next time. Likely some team ups will recur so that real friendships develop the way Christian friendships ALWAYS develop best, through mutual loving service. Let's look at how some team ups could also illustrate the outpouring of spiritual gifts on all members of the Body of Christ!

Team Up to Teach

For one class time or intergenerational education time, have 1 or 2 abled children or youth team up with a disabled child/teen to act out a saint's life skit. The child with disabilities will have his/her needs supported AND participate in teaching. Imagine how meaningful it would be, for instance, to have an abled teen act out Aaron while a nonspeaking Moses uses a speech output button to say over and over, "Let my people go!" with Miriam (disabled or abled) saying or using a speech output button to say, "Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea."

If you don't have any other inclusive times scheduled, having a monthly or seasonal intergenerational event where people can act out seasonal saints' lives together is a great way to allow everyone to experience what it's like to teach. Some children, abled and disabled, might discover their callings to teach this way!

Team Up for Diaconate Service

This is not the Altar-specific liturgical diaconate, but the kind we are all called to, serving one another at table the way that Martha and Mary and Peter's mother-in-law served Jesus and the way Jesus served His disciples. Team ups to bring around a cart with condiments or small bottles of water to tables at coffee hour allow everyone to participate in this ancient way of caring for each other's physical needs through service. This would be a great 1:1 team up for an abled and disabled child. Giving out small water bottles at the table, directly to each person rather than self-serve, allows for people to meet each other and feel the care in the act of giving a cup of water. Using

small water bottles allows for children with lower motor control to safely give out water without spills and damage.

Team Ups for Encouragement (an Expression of the Gift of Prophecy)

This team up would involve 1 or 2 abled peers with 1 or 2 disabled children/teens handing out stickers or notes saying short encouraging things like, “You are loved,” and “Glad you’re here!” to tables at coffee hour or intergenerational events. The great thing about this team up is that you can exercise the gift of prophecy by encouraging others even if you don’t make eye contact or speak, and even if you use a wheelchair or mobility device. A nonspeaker could join in with a speech output button that says, “I’m so glad you’re here today.” All of the team members can hand out an equal number of stickers and/or notes. The personal greeting would delight our elders, and it will give everyone a sense of being loved and connected.

Note: If you have a blind member who reads Braille, you might consider ordering Braille stickers with an encouraging phrase. I have ordered these before: <https://www.etsy.com/listing/1208873483/custom-braille-sticker-labels>

Team Ups for Administration & Interpretation

Team up to hand out mini laminated communication boards with important phrases for class and safety, and/or (perhaps on another occasion) cards with the faces of church members skilled in supporting communication needs. The mini communication boards might have safety phrases like, “I need a break,” “I need my mom,” “I need more,” and “I don’t like this,” on one side (or whatever suits the group best for stating helpful boundaries), and on the other, they could have prayer responses like “Lord, have mercy,” “Amen,” and “Alleluia.” The communication team cards would be great for getting the word

out about the skilled members available to help, and they could be printed on postcards in the office so that they are easy to update if others are added or move. For instance, if you have a communication team where one person speaks ASL, two can use paper AAC, and one always has a speech output app on hand and has inclusion apps on their phone, you might have a card with their four photos, names, and the way they can help. For instance, Maria, ASL; Effy, AAC; Sarah, accessible tech and apps; Helen, AAC. These cards could include the contact information for any communication coordinator as well as the church office, with instructions to have people email if they would like to be connected with the team members.

This team up would have a 1:1 disabled:abled child or youth pairing, and it would be especially meaningful for the disabled child in the pairing to have a complex communication support need. This is because they would know the value of their gift, and the sharing would have extra love behind it. We don't often think about the ongoing embodiment of the spiritual gifts of interpretation of tongues and tongues, but a lot of the way we support complex communication needs is an expression of those very gifts! Likewise, we sometimes think of administration as only to do with office work or moving the big institutional considerations, but it shows up in supporting communication as well!

Team Ups for the Gift of Tongues

One of the spiritual gifts that we tend to gloss past (pun intended) is that of speaking various tongues. Usually we think of people who are gifted in learning languages, and that's certainly something that the Holy Spirit inspires. It also applies to giving options for communication for nonspeakers! This team up of 2-3 people would be for special events or once/month such as

at an “All In Liturgy” rather than each week. An abled partner would hold a basket of speech output buttons recorded with the “Our Father” and “Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy,” for the disabled partner to hand out. Another speaking partner or two could record the buttons ahead of time; the persons recording the buttons can be disabled as well, with different disabilities than nonspeaking. These buttons would be for church members to take home so that disabled family members (of all ages) can participate in prayers at home. Giving people ways to communicate their prayers together is a beautiful way to serve each other with love.

Team Ups for Administration & Inviting

This team up would go around once or twice a month and at special events to hand out cards/flyers with up-to-date quarterly schedules of pastoral visit days with contact information for the clergy as well as the next inclusive liturgy date and time and any reliably scheduled future dates. Sometimes people make the mistake of thinking that posted or online information will reach people, but most people remember other people the most and movement in space. If you want people to attend and know they are actually welcome, you have to invite them personally. This team up not only reaches out with the personal touch, but because it’s an inclusive team of disabled and abled persons, it shows people that everyone is really welcome.

REPLACING QUESTIONS WITH DECLARATIVE LANGUAGE

For use by adults

Prepared by Summer Kinard, M.Div., Th.M.

Greetings: *Instead of questions like “How are you?” or “How was your day?” or “How’s it going?”*

- “It’s good to see you!”
 - Cultural variations: Shalom, handshakes, Here s/he is!, Good morning, good evening in native language (e.g. Kalimera in Greek)
- “I’m so glad you’re here.”
- “I always love seeing you.”
- “I have been keeping an eye out because I hoped to see you again. Last time was so fun!”
- “I hope you have had a good day/week.”
- “Oh, good! It’s you.”
- “I was hoping you would come.”
- “Hey! Welcome.”
- “Good. We’re all here.”
- “I’m looking forward to spending time with you/y’all today/tonight.”

Sharing: *Instead of asking questions like, “Do you have something to show me/us?” or “Do you have any questions?” or “What would you like to do next?” or “Who has something they’d like to share?”*

- Model first. Begin with sharing something yourself. If you have a physical prop, use it.
 - “Here’s a photo/object from my family vacation in _place_.”
 - “I wanted to tell you what I saw this morning.” (Describe scene that you found warming/good, e.g., seeing a bird with a sweet song or bright colors, watching a dog.)
- Say why you are sharing it.
 - “I wanted to show you because it made me happy.”
 - Describe part of what it evokes.
 - “When I see this _object_, it reminds me of standing/walking/doing something in _setting_ (eg, under a sunset, by water that smelled like salt, where the air was sweet and smelled like trees, where the flowers were to the horizon).”
 - “It makes me feel happy/sad/wistful/eager to make one like it.”

- “Let’s go around and share the things you brought in. Tell us why you like or don’t like them if you’d like.”
- “I want to connect with you with this thing that brings me joy/made me think.”
- “If you would like to share something, raise your hand.” (Wait to a slow mental count of thirty to give everyone a chance to process this request.)

Needs: *Instead of asking, “Is anyone hungry?” or “Does anyone need a restroom break?” or “Would anyone like a sensory fidget?” or “Would anyone like to stand?” normalize the needs by offering structure and opportunity.*

- “Welcome, everyone. We have sensory tools in baskets set around the tables. Grab as many as you would like to use in class.”
- “Okay, we have 5 minutes break. Now’s a good time to use the toilet.”
- “If you need a snack or drink, feel free to get one now, or quietly serve yourself during the lesson.”
- “As long as you don’t walk between the instructor and the class, you are welcome to pace in the pacing area.”
- “Standing is okay, and feel free to use the chair leg bands if you just need to stretch your legs a little.”
- “I’m grabbing a water. Raise your hand if you’d like one now, too. I’ll bring it over.”
- “The first aid kit is over here. Let’s get that scratch cleaned up, and then we will continue with our class/meeting.”
- “It’s midafternoon. Anyone who would like a snack or some gum, go ahead and get some from the snack station now. We will eat our snacks at our seats during the discussion.”
- “The remote for the twinkle lights is by [the door]. I’m setting them on slow twinkle, but you can change that once we finish looking at the slideshow.”

Safety: *Instead of asking people to repeat rules or wondering aloud what they were thinking or if something hurts, give information and structure.*

- “We will be following the rules posted around the room.”
- “Rule 1 says, “stay together.”
- “Our group plan is to stay inside the building unless we are with the group.”
- Describe emotions or actions and give safe alternatives for expression.
 - “I see that you seem frustrated. Let’s everyone have a ten second pause, and then we will push against the walls or use our jumbo squishies.”
 - “It’s okay to be angry. Punch the bean bag, not the wall. We need to keep your hand bones safe.”
 - “That film was scary. I’m giving myself a hug. Everyone, let’s take a minute to rub our upper arms.” (modeling a self hug)

- “When I feel sad or lonely, it helps to drink a hot tea/coffee/cocoa. Maybe some of you would like that, too. We are going to take a few minutes so everyone can get a cup who would like one.”
- “Stop! The street is dangerous for running. Let’s lap the room/building instead.” (get someone fast to go with them if outside)
- “That’s it. This was too much! (“too much information/light/heat,” if relevant). Time to dance it out!” (Stand and do a little dance interlude for at least 20 seconds.
- “Wow. That doesn’t sound fair. Here’s a plan: First, let’s shake it off with a dance, and then let’s think of what would be better.”
 - Play or sing a few lines of Taylor Swift’s “Shake It Off,” while you do some in-place dancing.
 - Model “I wish” or “I feel like it would be better if” scenarios.
 - “I wish they hadn’t canceled the sensory movie time slot.”
 - “It would be better to have enough cups for everyone.”
 - “It would be better to tell people you like them as they are.”
 - “I wish they had just said instead of making me guess.”
- Act out some action or interaction from the thing you’re discussing or learning about—in order to disarm a tense present situation with humor.
 - “It’s okay. That happens to everyone sometimes. Here’s how I imagine the characters in Pride and Prejudice would tell people the toilet was clogged. (Does contra dance moves, speaks in British accent) “Mr. Bennet, I am afraid there is a small concern with the plumbing.”
 - “Well, of course it’s awkward, but that doesn’t make you weird or mean you have to leave. Here’s Bob Ross telling everyone he’s sorry he passed gas: “Well, lookee there. We just fluff that little cloud. It’s a happy little fart cloud.”
 - “Not everyone will understand all the time, but we can try again. Imagine how Aragorn felt when he was a child in Rivendell. All the elves were like (British accent singsong) “Oooey wooley ilien,” and he didn’t know at first if they were inviting him to dinner or telling him his shoes were untied.”

Bearing One Another's Burdens Saint Spotlights

Saint Charitina (October 5) & Autistic Teeth

Saint Charitina is the patron saint of dental needs.

Read her story here: <https://www.oca.org/saints/lives/1995/10/05/102870-martyr-charitina-of-amisos>

This lesson is about removing shame from families with high support needs children. Shame around teeth and hygiene is one of the extra burdens that are carried by many high-support autistic families. It makes everything harder to feel so much pressure to care for children whose sensory and neurological needs make it hard to care for their bodies, if we also feel like we ought to be ashamed of ourselves or know what we don't know. This lesson is just an example of how bringing together resources to care for our bodies as we actually need that care—the way the Holy Unmercenary Healers did!—while asking the help of Christ and His Saints, and in a loving community, will allow us to make progress, lift our burdens, and allow the whole family of God to experience God's mercy and grace more deeply.

What will you do? Send out the link to martyr's story ahead of time. Because her teeth were broken in her sufferings, St. Charitina likes to help people with dental care needs. So we will ask her help and offer to our families a “show and tell” of adaptive dental resources. If you have the budget, offer some of these for people to take home with them. It's expensive, but that's part of the shame! Autistic families have a high burden of care and high barriers to finding and trying out new resources. Perhaps a charitable group or person

can donate the budget for families to be able to take some of these options with them to try with their high support needs family members.

We will simply ask St. Charitina in our daily prayers to help us with our children's dental care. Additionally, like the Holy Unmercenaries, we will offer the best adaptive resources available for them at no cost.

Here are some of the sensory needs adaptive dental care products that have worked for many autistic children and adults. Not every option is suitable for every person. But if you have these things available at a gathering of disability families, you will make a huge difference for them to allow them to try them.

Oranurse is \$50 for 12 tubes. <https://amzn.to/4ceDbDV>

Super-soft three-sided toothbrushes: <https://amzn.to/3SCjSoA>

Teeth wipes (might cause texture issues for some): <https://amzn.to/4hoogwD>

Tasty paste: <https://amzn.to/46tfLHl>

Hydroxyapatite paste: <https://amzn.to/4qMyoAT>

Non-“hot” mouthwash: <https://amzn.to/4xpe2yD>

Water flosser: <https://amzn.to/3T558Ya>

Velvet toothbrushes: <https://amzn.to/4d7KJbG>

Sensodyne (strong flavor but good for sensitivity): <https://amzn.to/45RX6Vw>

Saint Demetrius the Myrrh-Streamer (October 26) & Body Odor Care

Read his story here: <https://www.goarch.org/-/feast-of-the-holy-and-glorious-great-martyr-saint-demetrios-the-myrrh-streamer>

This well-beloved saint can also help us to remove shame from the challenges of teaching autistic children to care for their body odor management. He reminds us to be humble about the fragrances we exude. Caring for our children's persons with kindness and humility according to their needs might not make us stream myrrh, but it will put us on the path of love that will make us more saintly; who better to ask for help than one of our sweetest-smelling saints? As children reach puberty, the need for odor management emerges. However, texture sensitivities and fragrance aversions, demand avoidance, and feeling like one is being criticized, can all make it hard for many autistic children to accept the new routine of body odor management. Let's ask one of our sweetest-scented saints to guide us in this need, giving us insight, patience, humor, and kindness, without shame, to help our children.

For introducing the habit of odor management, remember that autistic people prefer plain, straightforward language, not hints or emotional manipulation. In general, autistic kids prefer spray on deodorants to gels, roll-ons, pastes, or sticks. (If your family uses lemon slices, just offer that one option in lieu of the options listed below. Usually American schools require deodorant, and American culture expects no breakthrough body odor as is common with lemon slice body odor management.) Buy a fragrance that goes with your other household body care items (for instance, sandalwood, lavender, citrus, cucumber, fruit) or a couple of neutral/unscented option (unscented/sensitive, very light scents that might be labeled "fresh," or "clean"). Have them at the ready for a show and tell and to try.

Over the first few weeks of introducing the new habit, start putting on your deodorant in a public area. Tell your child about what you're doing. Comment aloud on how you wonder what the difference is between "fresh" and "clean," or whether you think the lavender deodorant goes with your lavender body wash. Be neutral and positive, without embarrassment or upset.

HERE ARE SOME SCRIPT IDEAS:

The Uniform: Use the language of "uniform" to make it a neutral requirement. Now that you are getting older, part of your daily uniform is to spray three squirts of deodorant under each arm. Let me show you how I do it.

I aim the nozzle.

I turn my head so none gets in my eyes.

I spray three little sprays.

Now it's your turn to try. You can try spraying it on me first if you'd like. *(let them try it on you if they want)* I can help spray you, or you can spray yourself.

Narrate: Aim the nozzle. Turn your head so none gets in your eyes. Spray three little sprays.

The Scents: Give options that fit your overall household scents; favor neutral and unscented options.

Narrate: I use this "clean" fragrance. Let me put that under this arm.

And I use "Fresh" as well. Let me put that under this arm.

You can use one of these, too.

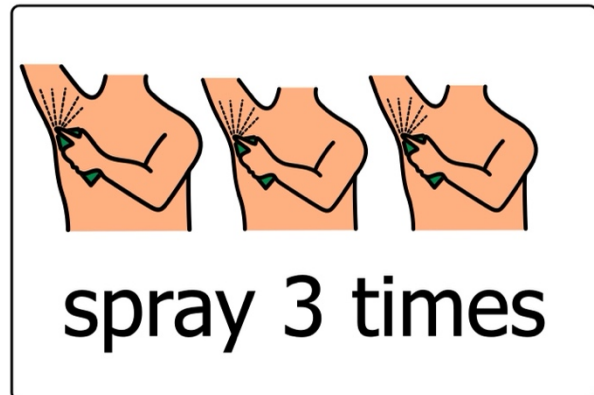
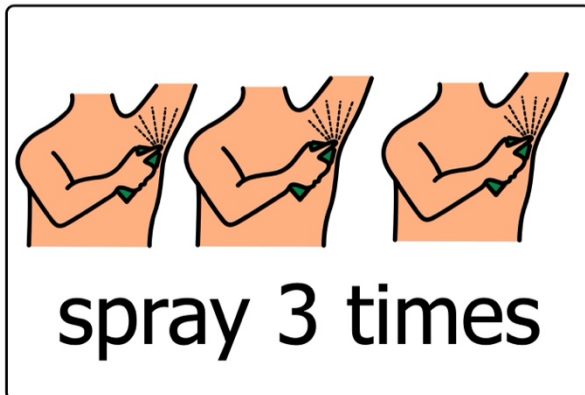
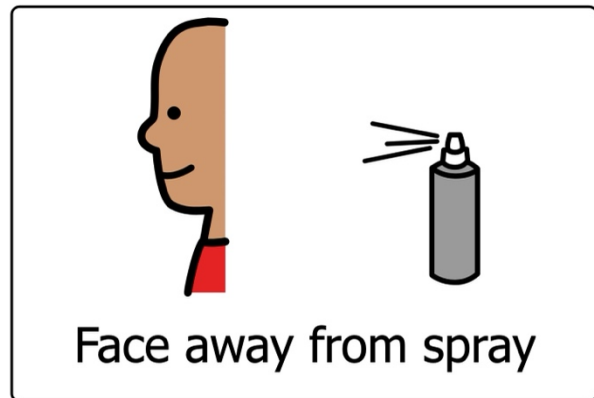
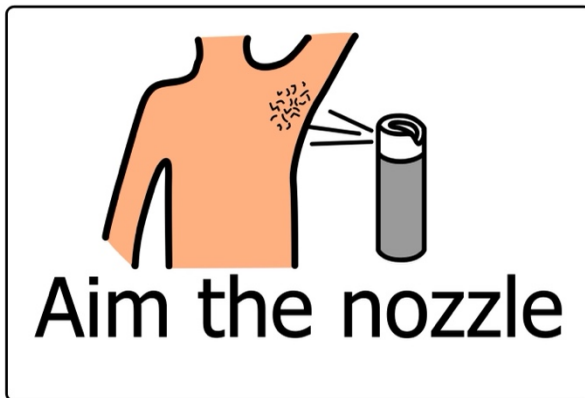
Offer for them to try by holding it out to them. Don't get mad if they don't want to. Just nod and move on.

I'm going to put these in the powder room and in your bathroom so you can try when you're ready.

Place the spray deodorants on the sink in each bathroom.

Add this instruction sequence to the bathrooms and/or wherever the child might try to use the deodorant.

Put on Deodorant



Feast Lesson: The Protection (Skepi) of the Holy Theotokos

Celebrated either on October 1st or 28th

Materials: spinning light wands or iridescent spinners, white scarf, Picasso tiles, pop lights, “stained glass” clear stickers, print out of the icon (attached; has been paid for and licensed for noncommercial use), recordable button recorded to say "God always loves us"

LED Pop lights: <https://amzn.to/4cgVB6O>

Spinning light wands: <https://amzn.to/4hXwvgY>

Fiber optic wand lights: <https://amzn.to/46sXR7B>

iridescent spinners: <https://amzn.to/4grG5aQ>

Picasso tiles: <https://amzn.to/4gqckqT>

Clear sticker paper for printing icon: <https://amzn.to/3SYhykF>

White silk scarf (can be used for many lessons): <https://amzn.to/3Ugd89c>

This lesson can be repeated all month or at least have the items made available so students can play with them. When you offer the supplies for acting out, remind them of the central message: God changes the light sometimes to show us the mercy and love that is always there for us through Christ and His Mother and the Saint.

Story: In the 900s, over a thousand years ago, the people in the Church of Blachernae in Constantinople were discouraged and overwhelmed. A saint called Saint Andrew the Fool prayed to God, and God changed the light so that his friend Epiphanius was able to see a vision. It turned out that the Holy Theotokos was holding her holy veil over all the faithful the whole time! God changed the light so that Epiphanius could see it and tell everyone.

Build on this: In lots of holy icons, we see these changes in light when God shows His mercy as ovals of blue, white, yellow, and sometimes other colors around Christ and the Holy Theotokos. Look at icons of the Resurrection, Ascension, Transfiguration, Choir of Angels, and Holy Protection. Some of them will have the mandorla or oval of light/colors, sometimes with angels. These can be brought in throughout the year so you can point out how God changes the light sometimes to reveal how His love is always there for us.

Activity:

Say: Let's change the light now and imagine how the Mother of God is looking after us all with love.

Do: Everyone plays with the lights. Teachers hold the white scarf out over the students.

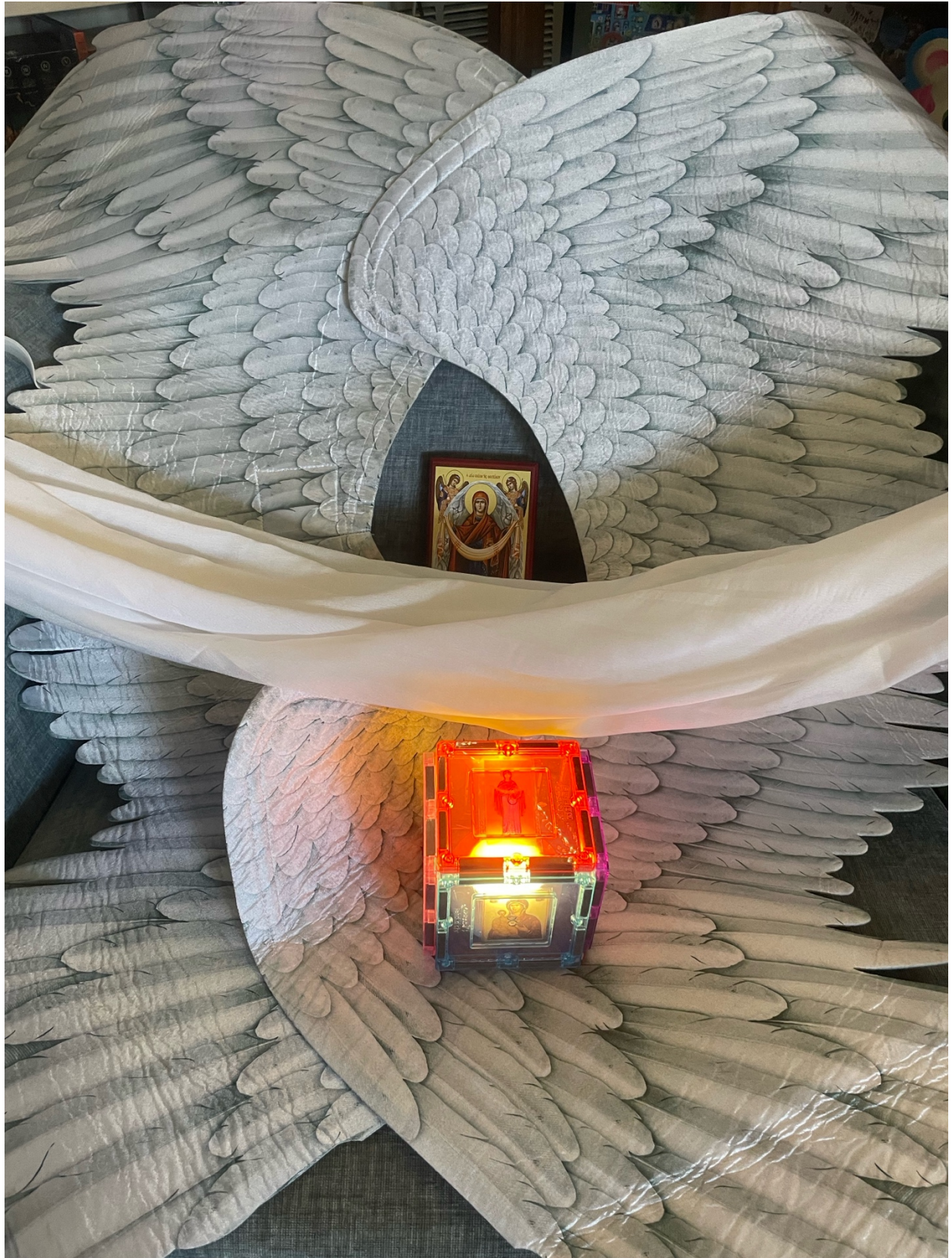
With Picasso Tiles & stickers: For students with motor control, have them peel and stick icons one per square tile. Put pop lights inside a cube made of the square tiles that have stickers so they can see the light shine through.

Making the churches with the lights can be a regular activity.

Discussion idea if there's attention: Our churches have gold and windows to reflect light and to remember we are surrounded by the love of God.

Button recording: God always loves us.

(Photos follow of part the lesson in action. The licensed icon follows them.)







OCTOBER GOSPEL LESSONS

I have two Gospels featured here, and you can build out the parable of the sower lessons (the second set) for repeat lessons. The first set is important for autistic children, because we have to teach them boundaries as well as generosity. Their facility with trusting others and delayed processing and other vulnerabilities make them more likely targets for abusers, so that “Mercy” lesson which includes boundaries/limits is an important one to teach them each year. There are also saints’ lives and a feast day lesson for this month, so you have plenty of material to choose from year over year.

Second Sunday of Luke/Mercy Gospel, First Sunday of October

First Sunday of October/ 2nd Sunday of Luke

Luke 6:31-36

The Lord said, “Do to others as you would have them do to you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

Goal: Teach that God loves everyone the same, and we share kindness with people because of God’s love for them. We will also show how showing mercy does not mean not having boundaries. This is important, because without

teaching that nuance, we leave autistic children more vulnerable to exploitation. That's why a couple of the examples will be of someone trying to steal more than one squishy heart. We tell them, "No! Everyone gets the same love. You can't take from other people. That's not acting like God."

Note: This lesson works great with a larger/combined group because there are 25 available printables. If you would like to try having an older teen class join you to help one day, this would be a good lesson to integrate them in. You should have an adult teacher/helper or one of the non-disabled teens who can bear the responsibility to emote safely and won't take it personally be the "bad guy" characters. Since everyone needs to learn about almsgiving and nearly everyone loves the heart squishies, getting to participate in this lesson together is a good option for integrating non-disabled students into the inclusive environment. Each student gets to keep the heart they are given. If you decide to invite the group, make sure that you have enough hearts. They come in packs of 24, so you might need an extra set. Any extras can be used as part of the sensory basket options for ongoing class use.

Materials: These squishy gel filled hearts will be best, unless someone in the class likes to bite through squishies. They shouldn't eat the gel.

<https://amzn.to/3U19eks>

So if needed, these foam hearts will work, too: <https://amzn.to/4zpaVIw>

A Big Gift Box with a Bow On the Lid (you can decorate this yourself, use something you have around the house for Christmas, or buy this one:

<https://amzn.to/3Uj7inh>

Bad guy/good guy almsgiving printables: <https://summerkinard.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/08/bad-guy-good-guy-almsgiving-printables.pdf>

These printables are also included at the end of this October Gospel Lesson set.

Optional: Have someone dress up as Jesus with a halo and a playsilk to hold the gift box.

Speech output button: “God Loves everyone because God is love.”

Activity

Place all of the squishy hearts into the gift box. Set the box on a central table or chair, or have a teacher/helper hold it. Select some of the printables to hand out to the people present. Include at least one of the “enemies” (the first three printables) and the corresponding boundary, to be held by an adult helper, or alternatively, turned face down on a chair along with the boundary, to be revealed as part of the circle as you go around. You will throw them in there and make sure to tell them they are not allowed to steal hearts from others! God loves them, and they don’t get to be mean to us.

Stand in a circle around the box/Jesus holding box.

Tell the class, “God told us to love everyone, because God loves everyone. We practice kindness and giving to others because God does that, too.”

Hold up the box.

“In this box is a little gift that represents God’s love. Is there one for everybody?”

Allow responses.

“Yes! God gives love equally to everyone.”

Push speech output button.

“When we give alms to help people who are hungry, we give to everyone, too. Let’s see what God is giving.”

Open the box. Show the hearts.

“Oh, Wow! It’s love! Who is it for?”

Ask someone to push the speech output button.

“Yes! Everybody. Let’s see how this works.”

Read aloud the different characters on the sheets one at a time. Hand each person a heart after reading it. Ask someone to push the button each time.

When you get to the bad guy(s), add this:

Bad guy, moving side to side with sneaky fingers: “I’ll just take some hearts from other people, too.”

Teacher: “No! You may not!”

Bad guy, whining: “But I thought God loves me.”

Teacher: “God does love you! But you don’t get to hurt other people!”

Bad guy, lowering head: “Okay. I’m sorry. I guess this love is enough after all.”

Resume the circuit, giving freely a heart to each person present.

End with the speech output button & letting people play with their squishy hearts.

Sing Song Option: “Beloved, Let Us Love One Another I John 4:7&8”

Guitar chords: <https://tabs.ultimate-guitar.com/tab/ernie-rettino-debby-kerner-rettino/beloved-i-john-47-8-chords-2990399>

YouTube: https://youtu.be/osp_zs2JIhE?si=g2FKAjwBWpP4fy5Z

Connect With Parish:

If your parish has a food drive or other charitable drive/event during the autumn leading up to the holidays, you can mention it or set up the classroom donation option at this point. Show an example by putting a wrapped classroom snack into the box.



**Sneaky people who
do wrong things**



NO

**Even though God Loves Them,
People who hit are not allowed to
take from us or others!**



NO

**Even though God Loves Them,
People who sneak are not allowed to
take from us or others!**



**People who hit
others to be mean**



People who mock us

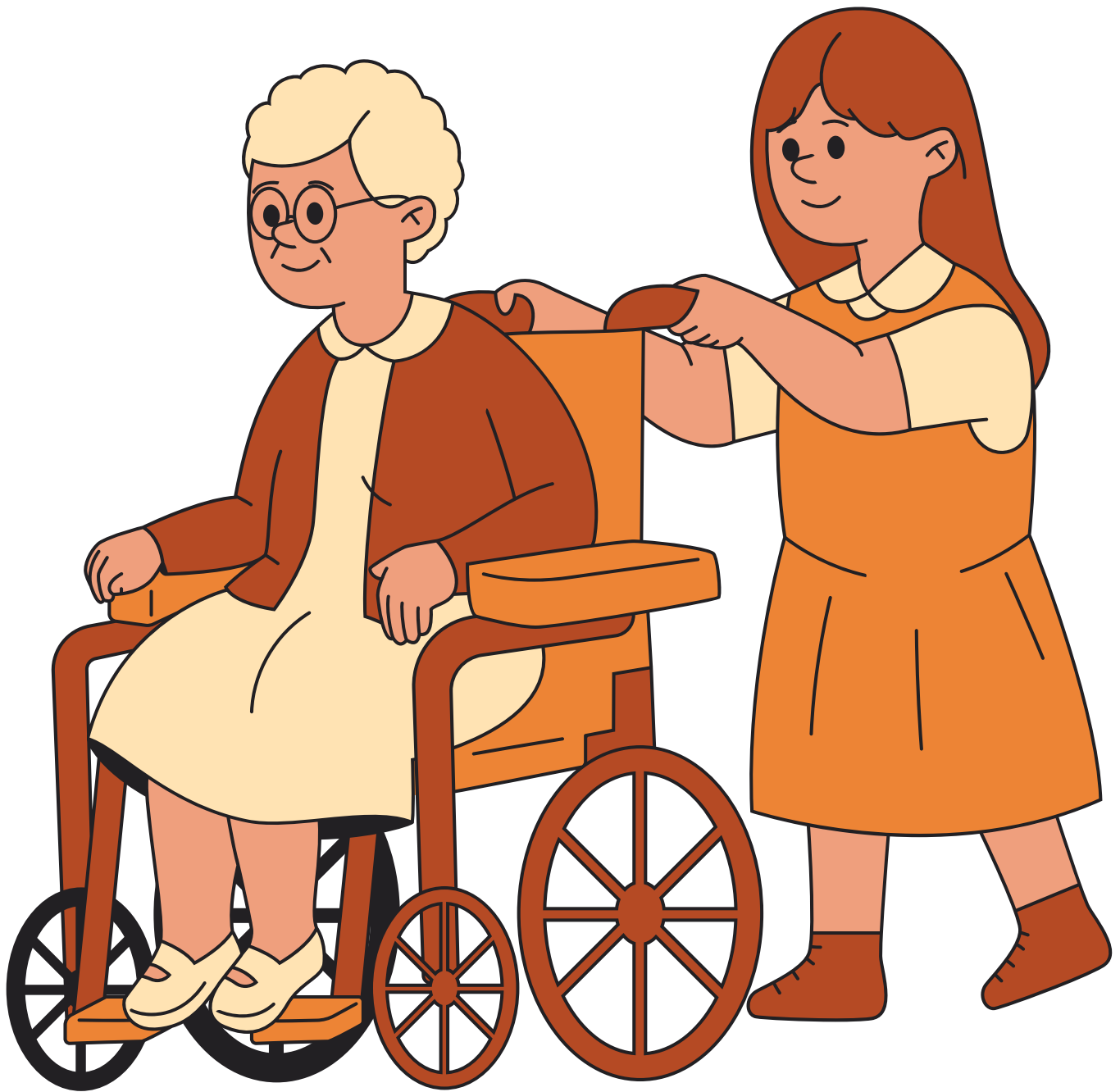


NO

**Even though God Loves Them,
People who mock us are not allowed
to take from us or others!**



Our Friend at School



Our older relatives



Our Older Neighbors at Church



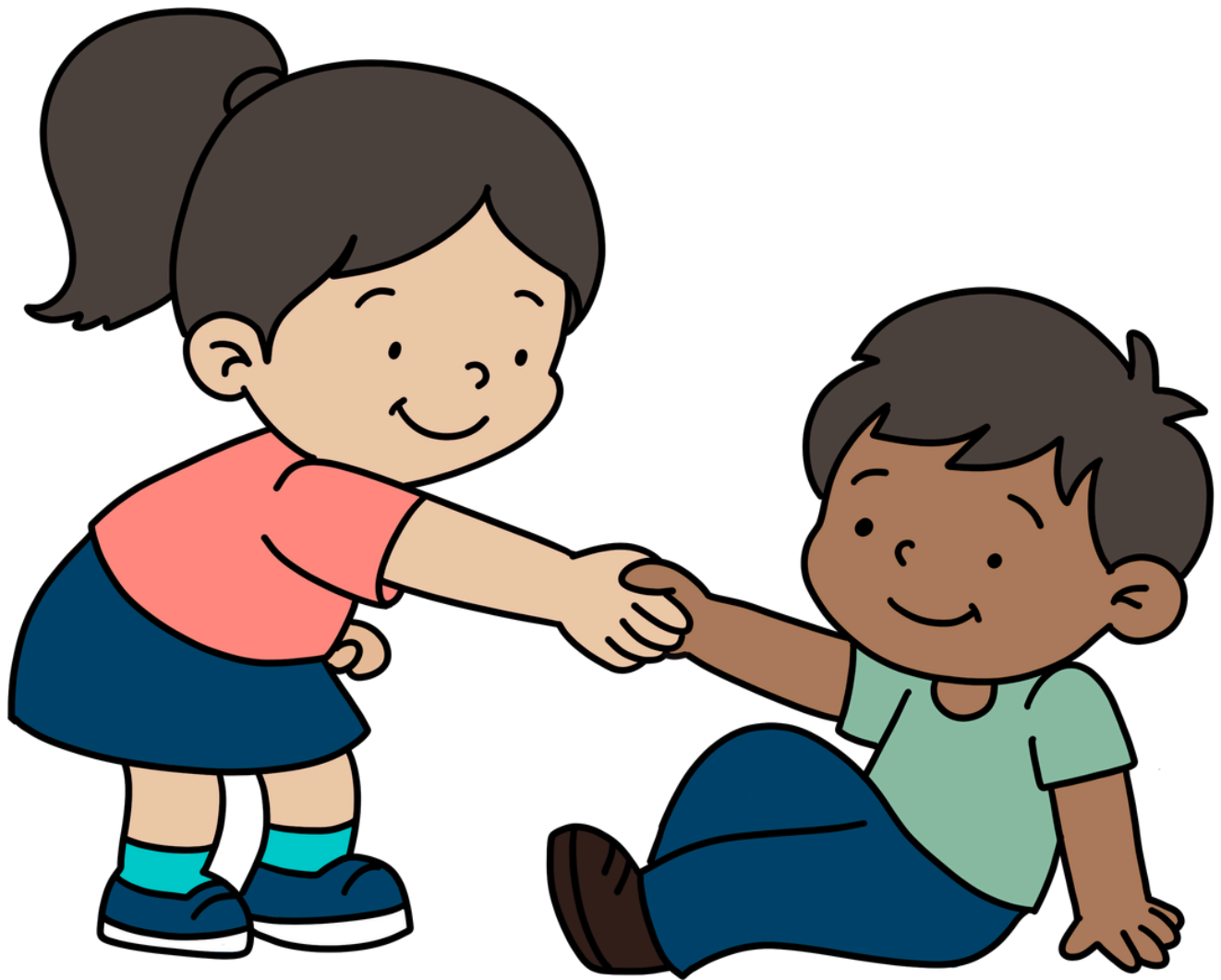
Our Friend Who Wears Headphones



Our Friend who is overwhelmed



Our friend who is self-soothing by rocking



Our Neighbor At the Playground



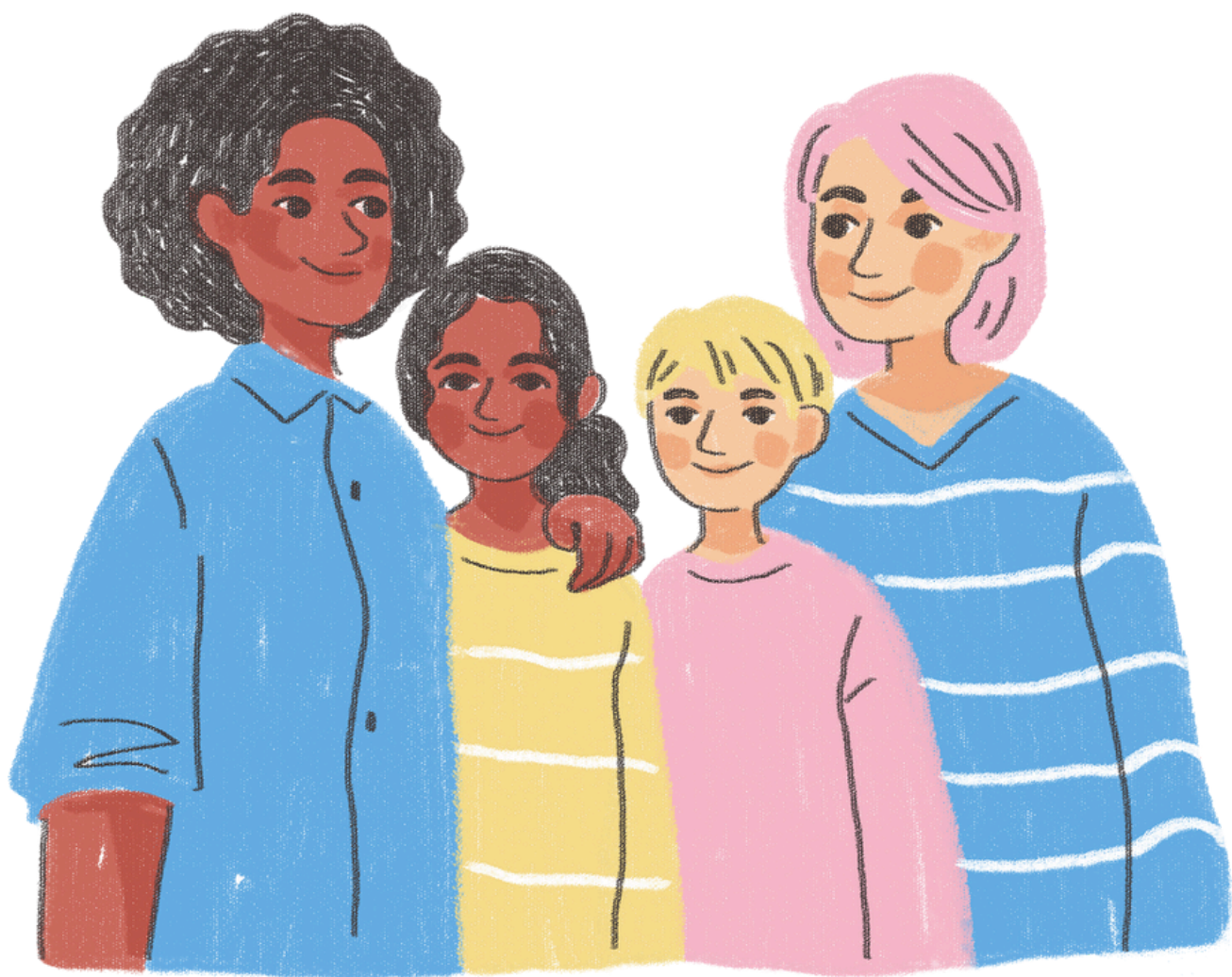
Our friend who helps us



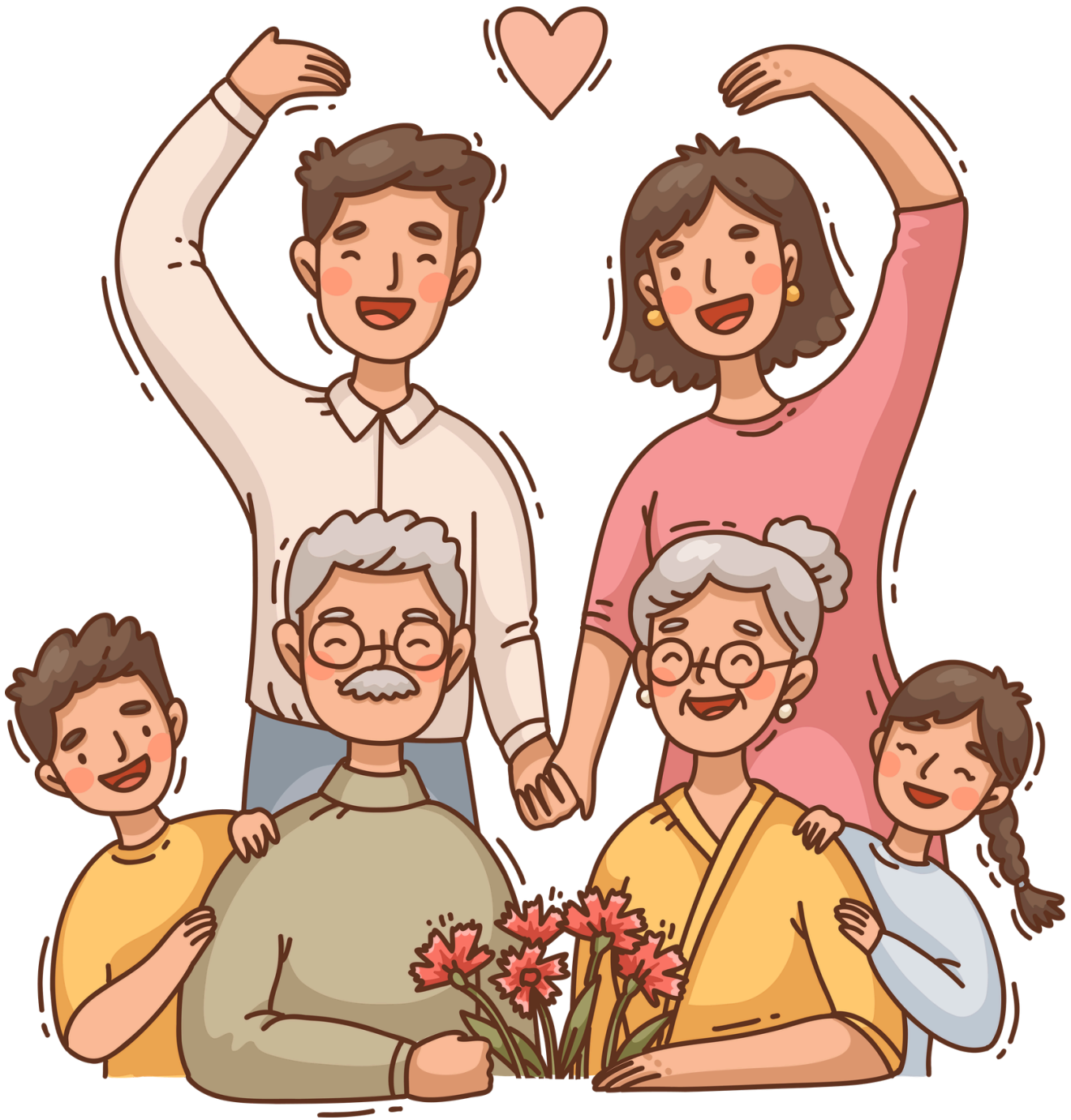
Our family



Our Mom



Our neighbors down the street



Our grandparents



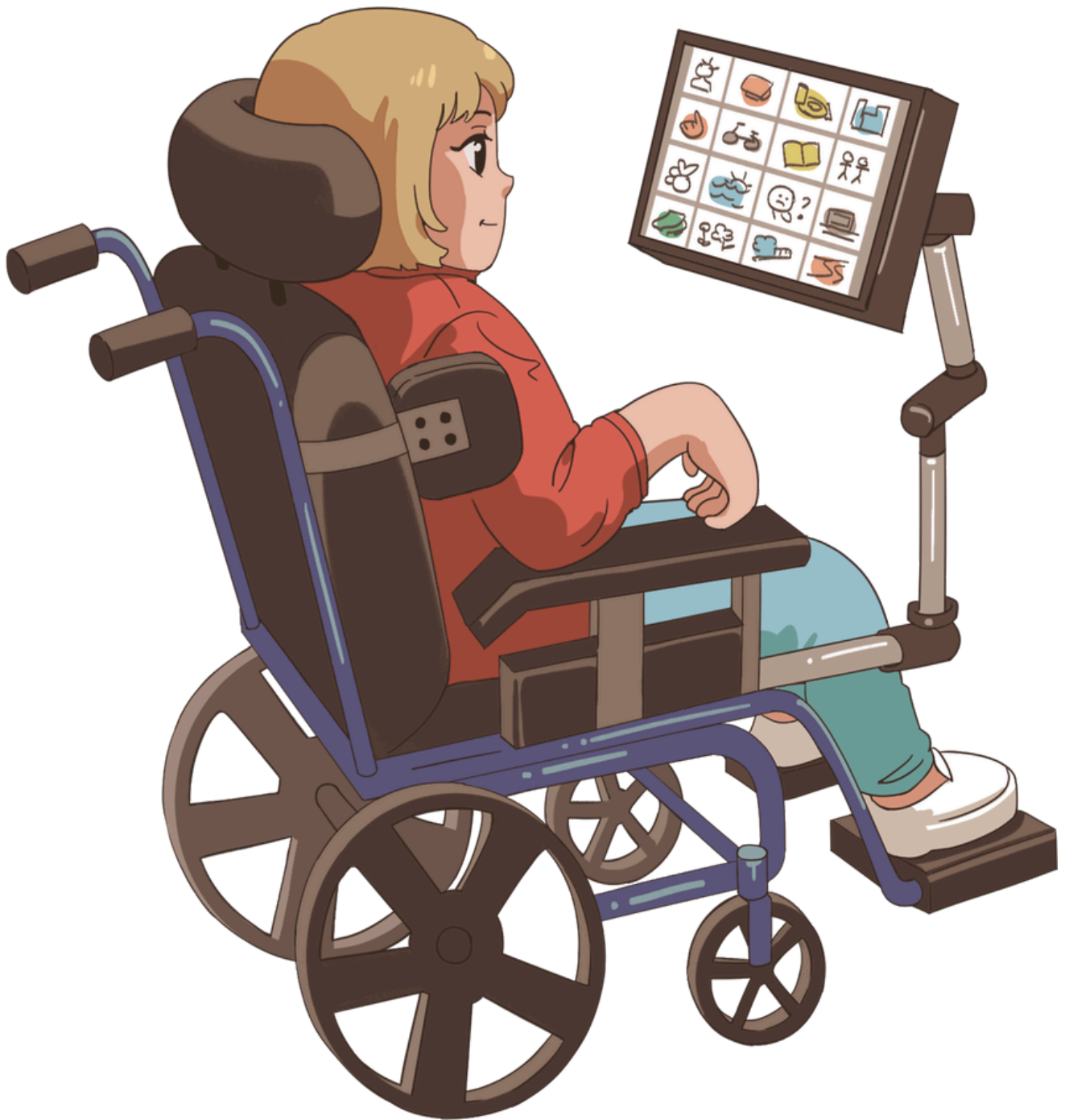
Our Dad



Our friends on vacation



Our teacher at school



Our friend who uses a wheelchair



Our friend who uses a rollator



Our friends at dance



Our friend from class

Sunday of the Seventh Ecumenical Council/Parable of the Sower/Second Sunday in October

Materials: **bird puppets** (you have these already; if they are hard to find, the backup is to print out and cut out the bird images that follow this lesson); **beans OR at least 100 ball pit balls**, clay if using beans, **sensory canoes** (or ball pit), designated areas for "thorns" and "rocks," optional pipe cleaner "thorns"

If you want to use this lesson fully by doing it for 2-3 weeks (even if it bleeds into November), on the second or third week introduce **pointy sticks for thorns** <https://amzn.to/4oLcLNV> and **rock squishies** <https://amzn.to/4ooCJgi>

Ball pit balls are readily available at any Walmart or box store, or you can order some on Amazon: <https://amzn.to/4hkfyuX>

There are a couple of ways to teach this. Both are highly sensory but will be different for different students. The beans version of the lesson is fun but will lead to a lot of beans on the floor! If you want to skip it, that's fine. It can be fun, but not everyone wants to bring in a whole bin of beans and have to deal with sweeping up a lot of them. I use that version usually when there's carpet or a student who's really into scooping and pouring as a stim. A lot of times I teach this first with the beans and shoe box sized bins, then the next week with the ball pit balls, then the third week with ball pit balls and the extra sticks added. Depending on the response, sometimes I have both beans and ball pit balls on second and third go, but the kids tend to like the balls a lot and skip the beans after week one. If you stick with beans only, just add the thorn and rock sticks the second week and do two weeks. This will be laid out with beans to ball pit balls in canoes progression, though you can skip bean week according to your preference. I think you have a combination of needs in your class such that all three repetitions would be welcome, but doing just two is fine!

The focus scripture for October is the Parable of the Sower. Luke 8: 5-15

And when a great crowd came together and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable: “A sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell along the path, and was trodden under foot, and the birds of the air devoured it. And some fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. And some fell among thorns; and the thorns grew with it and choked it. And some fell into good soil and grew, and yielded a hundredfold.” As he said this, he called out, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, he said, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but for others they are in parables, so that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand. Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, that they may not believe and be saved. And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy; but these have no root, they believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away. And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. And as for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bring forth fruit with patience.

Simplified Version to tell with the props (plain version here, annotated below):

Jesus taught about God's love for us.

He said that people who teach about God's love are like farmers planting seeds:

- Some seeds fall on the hard path and get eaten by birds.

- Some seeds fall on rocky soil and die because they do not make deep roots.
- Some of the seeds fall in thorns and get choked by the weeds.
- But most of the seeds land in good soil and bring forth lots and lots of fruit.

Our hearts are like the soil! We can make them good for growing God's love with good practices.

Some ways we make our hearts grow in love are:

praying, going to church, being kind, making our cross, singing together, kissing our icons, pushing our prayer buttons, receiving Communion, (others the students offer)

Story Sequence for all three weeks: Images 3-6 of this image

set <https://www.freebibleimages.org/illustrations/parable-sower/>

Week/Option One: BEANS! BIRDS! BINS!

This one has the most readily available supplies. You can use trays, shoe boxes, plastic bins, or whatever you have for the four types of soil. You'll want the largest bin or tray for clay to plant the beans in the good soil. It's most satisfying for the bean version to have a deeper bin of about 10 lbs of beans (pinto or black usually hold together best without shedding; you can choose to wash most of them well later if you don't want to waste them or save them as a stim).

Set up a deep bin or bucket with beans. These are the seeds of the Word of God, which for our purposes we are simplifying to the Love of God, because that's a major theme in our autumn scriptures.

Set up a tray with nothing in it. You'll use the bird puppets for this one to "eat" the seeds that land on the hard path.

Set up a tray with "rocks" (stims) or simply put little lumps of clay in it so it's not smooth and has very little "soil" clay.

Set up a tray with a little clay and "thorns" which can be pointy stims, little cut up pieces of paper that stick out, or pipe cleaner pieces sticking up from clay pressed to the bottom.

Set up the Good Soil tray with clay on the bottom smoothed out and covering the bottom.

Show and Tell the Story

Use the images for the sequence on the sequence board and/or just tell the story with the props:

1. Jesus taught about God's love for us. (gather around table or area with bins)
2. He said that people who teach about God's love are like farmers planting seeds: (show the kids the beans and let them touch them and play with them. Tell them they are like God's love that can grow where it's planted and tended.)
3. The farmers plant the seeds by scattering them everywhere. (Get some beans in hand and sprinkle them over all four trays.)
4. Some seeds fall on the hard path and get eaten by birds. (Go back to the first tray. Sprinkle some seeds. Have the students do so, too. They'll probably throw them and that's chill. Use the bird puppets to pretend to eat the seeds. Say something like, "Oh, no! Those seeds fell on the path! The birds are going to eat them up." Model birds eating the seeds and have kids participate as they wish. Some will want to keep the birds to play with for a while, and that's fine.)
5. Some seeds fall on rocky soil and die because they do not make deep roots. (Sprinkle seeds, have students do so, on the "rocky" tray. If you're repeating the lesson with rock and thorn stims, have those in the tray and let kids crush the seeds with the rock stims.)
6. Some of the seeds fall in thorns and get choked by the weeds. (Sprinkle seeds, have students do so. If using the "thorn" stims, have the students crowd

out the seeds. Some of them will want to play with the stims, and that's ok. It will help them pay attention.)

7. But most of the seeds land in good soil and bring forth lots and lots of fruit. (Sprinkle seeds and have students sprinkle seeds onto the clay tray and press them down.)

8. Our hearts are like the soil! We can make them good for growing God's love with good practices. (As you go through and list things to do to prepare your heart, have them add more seeds to the tray. It can be over the top ridiculous how many seeds get into the clay tray, and that's kind of the point.)

9. Some ways we make our hearts grow in love are:
praying, going to church, being kind, making our cross, singing together, kissing our icons, pushing our prayer buttons, receiving Communion, (others the students offer)

Transition to singing, etc.

Week/Option Two: With Ball Pit Balls

Optional: You can draw hearts on the balls, but it's fine without. I do this for about 50 balls when I do this lesson because I have a giant ball pit filled with hundreds of balls that we get out each year. We use the "love" seeds to plant the other seeds as we name good habits. You can add this another year if you'd like.

Set up the sensory canoes as the "good soil." The hard path, rocky soil, and thorns are bins or cardboard boxes (or areas on the floor). Narrate the lesson as with beans, but instead of pressing into clay, you drop balls into the boxes/areas and act out the story with the bird puppets, thorn and rock stims, and the canoes. The canoes are where students can sit inside to play with/cover themselves with the ball pit balls as well. The canoes are the soil instead of boats for this lesson. This lesson has more gross motor movements

and tends to be more popular. The balls will get thrown, but that's kind of the point of the sowing. If they do it, say, "Just like the farmer in the story!" and redirect to planting in the "good soil" instead of the table, or what have you. This accommodates the need to throw but also makes it part of the lesson and gives the gentle redirection option.

Show and Tell the Story

Use the images for the sequence on the sequence board and/or just tell the story with the props:

1. Jesus taught about God's love for us. (gather around area with bins)
2. He said that people who teach about God's love are like farmers planting seeds: (show the kids the ball pit balls (they come in clear plastic bags) and let them touch them and play with them. Tell them they are like God's love that can grow where it's planted and tended.)
3. The farmers plant the seeds by scattering them everywhere. (Get some ball pit balls in hand and sprinkle them over all four areas including into the canoes.)
4. Some seeds fall on the hard path and get eaten by birds. (Go back to the first box. Sprinkle a few seeds. Have the students do so, too. They'll probably throw them and that's chill. Use the bird puppets to pretend to eat the seeds. Say something like, "Oh, no! Those seeds fell on the path! The birds are going to eat them up." Model birds eating the seeds and have kids participate as they wish. Some will want to keep the birds to play with for a while, and that's fine.)
5. Some seeds fall on rocky soil and die because they do not make deep roots. (Sprinkle seeds, have students do so, on the "rocky" tray. If you're repeating the lesson with rock and thorn stims, have those in the tray and let kids crush the seeds with the rock stims.)
6. Some of the seeds fall in thorns and get choked by the weeds. (Sprinkle seeds, have students do so. If using the "thorn" stims, have the students crowd

out the seeds. Some of them will want to play with the stims, and that's ok. It will help them pay attention.)

7. But most of the seeds land in good soil and bring forth lots and lots of fruit. (Sprinkle seeds and have students sprinkle seeds into the canoes and press them down. Some will climb in. That's fine.)

8. Our hearts are like the soil! We can make them good for growing God's love with good practices. (As you go through and list things to do to prepare your heart, have them add more seeds to the canoes. It can be over the top ridiculous how many seeds get into the clay tray, and that's kind of the point. If kids are in the canoes, put the balls on top of them. This will be funny and silly, and you'll probably have to gather the balls and keep putting them back in the canoe on the kids in there. *Caveat: If for some reason one child does not like having the balls with them but needs to be in the canoe, let them have that one for a soothing time and use the other one as the good soil so that student can calm down; don't put ball pit balls on them if they look uncomfortable or distressed rather than interested or smiling/laughing.*)

9. Some ways we make our hearts grow in love are: (as you name good practices, add more ball pit balls into the canoe/onto students who are laughing/smiling as well)

praying, going to church, being kind, making our cross, singing together, kissing our icons, pushing our prayer buttons, receiving Communion, (others the students offer)

Transition to singing, etc.



Jesus taught us about God.



Oh, No!
There were
FAKE gods!



ZEUS



I'II TRICK you!



ROMAN EMPEROR



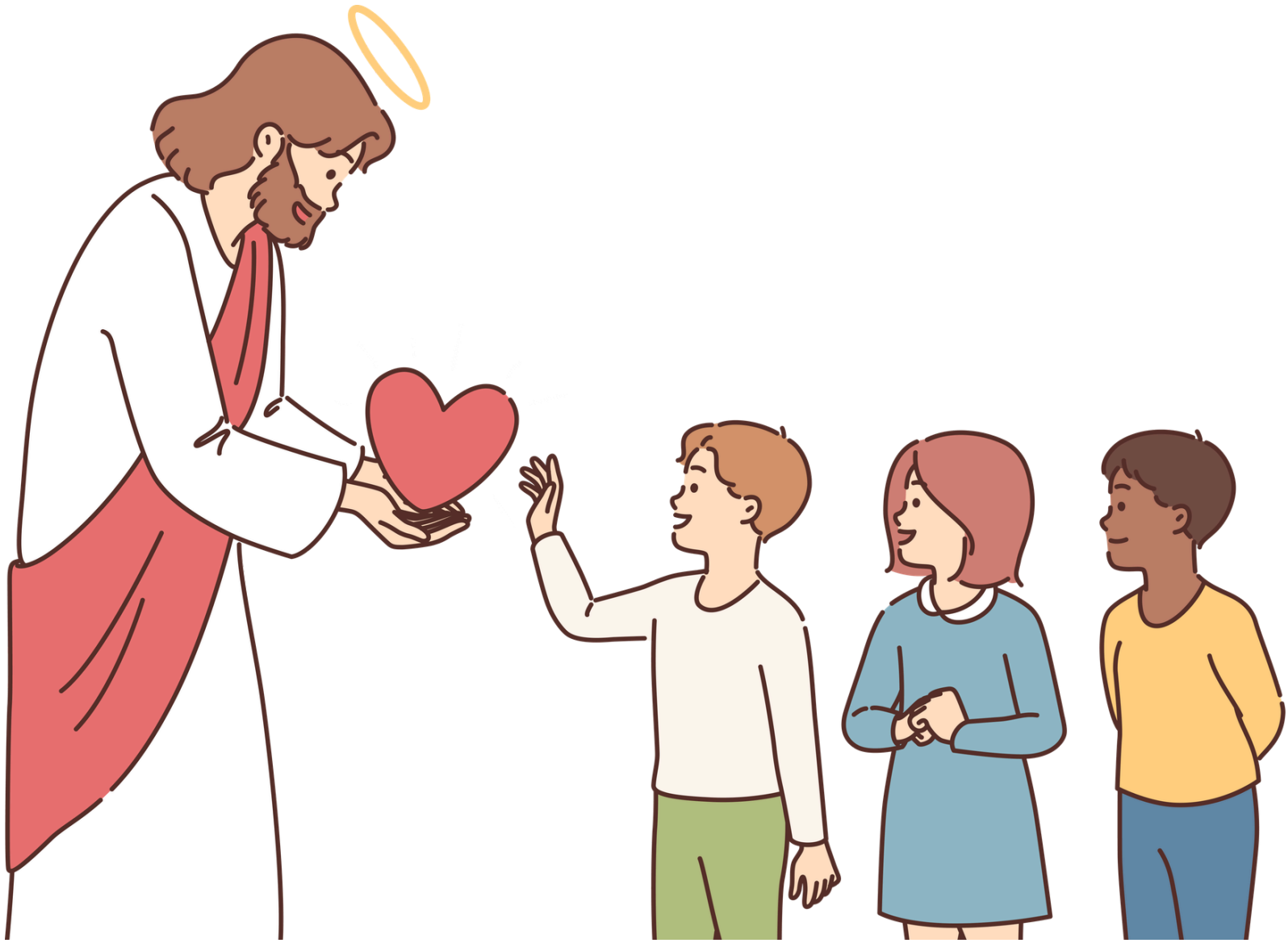
I'II PUNISH you.



JESUS



**I MADE you,
and I LOVE you!**



**We SHARE love
with Christ!**



**Jesus invites us to
DANCE with God!**



Jesus invites us to DANCE with God!

**The Love of the Holy Trinity dances within
the Godhead, and Christ comes to us to
invite us to join the dance!**



Jesus invites us to DANCE with God!

**The Love of the Holy Trinity dances
within the Godhead, and Christ comes to
us to invite us to join the dance!**



Jesus LOVES all humans!



Jesus LOVES all humans!

"O Lord Who Loves Humanity, Glory to Thee!"

Philanthrope, doxa Si!

SECOND INTERGENERATIONAL SESSION

Fighting Dragons with the Angels & Dragon-Slaying Saints

“You don’t become holy by fighting evil. Let evil be. Look towards Christ and that will save you. What makes a person saintly is love.”

— St. Porphyrios

Background

The feast of Archangel Michael is a great time to schedule this lesson, because Archangel Michael is one we so often see overcoming the dragon. We fight dragons by cultivating love. Archangel Michael’s burning love for God leads him to say in the face of every challenge, “Who is like God?” We join that refrain in Pascha when we sing, “Who is so great a God as our God? You are the one who works wonders!” There is so much joy with God, and this we experience with the help of the holy angels. Holy angels bring us messages of joy, of courage, guidance, and protection. We will be covering more about holy angels in the Sensory Centered Nativity Play and in a future vacation church school about dragon-slayers, including holy angels. For this set of lessons, we are going to focus on how our love in action, holy virtues (good habits), allow us to join with the holy angels and dragon-slaying saints to overcome evil and to bring more good options forth for each other.

St. Marina (Margaret) of Antioch beat the dragon from inside of it with the sign of the Cross and her unwavering faith in Christ. She was drawn close to Christ by the Holy Mother of God, and her great love and virtues made her extremely brave throughout her torture and imprisonment, so that she even defeated the devil in the form of a dragon, bursting from his belly when he ate

her and beating him on the head with a hammer. We are not here to frighten the children, but to inspire them to imitate her great love and good habits, so we are going to be focusing on the different ways our children are able to pick up the hammer of faith to beat back evil in their lives, by participating in the great love of God.

St. Marina's Hammer of Good Habits

Goal: Beating a dragon with virtue club (building hope, cultivating love, etc)

Materials: large inflatable dragon OR large dragon puppet/stuffed toy, pool noodles cut into 3-5 even sections, sharpies, darker scarf/blanket for when she's eaten, scarf and halo for dress up as St. Marina; optional craft and smaller-area version (though you should still make at least one hammer to demonstrate and let the kids beat the puppet): peg doll for St. Marina, mini dragon finger puppet. I usually teach both ways, acting out as a skit AND letting kids decorate a Marina peg so she can stomp on a little dragon puppet. If you are short on time, favor the gross motor skit over the little tabletop peg doll game. (If you're in an institutional setting with a hospital bed table, though, the little peg and puppet can be combined with a small pool noodle hammer to allow the patient to bonk the little dragon over the head with the little saint doll.) Large dragon: <https://amzn.to/3SDlsPB>

Finger puppet dragon: <https://amzn.to/4qMqMwW>

Dragon puppet: <https://amzn.to/4yf6RcC>

You can also find puppets at Folkmanis.com

Optional: if you have a modular couch or room divider, you can make a little prison cell where the person playing Marina can stand alongside the inflatable dragon.

Speech Output: Lord Jesus Christ, help me!

Act It Out

Narrate the story while volunteers (students or helpers) act it out. Have a volunteer Marina put on scarves and/or a halo. If you have a room divider or modular couches, you can make her a little prison cell to have her step into as you introduce her.

This is Saint Marina. When she heard about the Mother of God, she was inspired and became a Christian. Marina grew in love for Christ. She practiced good works and prayed. Soon some bad guys heard about her great faith and good character, and they tried to make Marina stop praying to Christ. She told them no.

Have Marina shake her head no. She should hold her hands up and to the sides like she's praying. Let a child push the speech output: Lord Jesus Christ, help me!

The bad guys did NOT like that. They were really mean to Marina and threw her in prison.

Have her step into the prison if you have one. Otherwise she can step to the side and crouch a bit.

But Marina kept on loving Christ! She was filled with love and hope. No human could get her to turn away from her love for God.

Point at Marina and gesture like you're bossing her around. Marina turns her head and opens her arms to pray again. Let a child push the speech output button: Lord Jesus Christ, help me!

No one could get Marina to stop loving God! So then a dragon came and decided HE would try to make her turn from God.

Place dragon next to Marina/in her cell with her.

Marina made her cross and kept praying.

*Have Marina make her cross and open her hands to pray again. Speech output button:
Lord Jesus Christ, help me!*

Then the dragon ATE her.

Have the dragon make a “nomnomnom” noise. Place darker scarf or blanket over Marina.

But Marina still believed in Christ! From inside the dragon, she made the sign of the cross and asked the Lord for help.

Marina makes her cross. Have someone push the speech output button, “Lord Jesus Christ, help me!”

The dragon burst apart, and St. Marina stepped out and started praying again, thanking God for His great love.

Have Marina smile and lift her hands to the side again to pray.

While she was praying, St. Marina noticed that there was a hammer on the ground in the corner of her cell.

Show the pool noodle “hammer.” Marina picks it up and sets it down by her feet.

She went back to praying.

Marina holds up her hands and smiles again. Someone pushes the speech output device, “Lord Jesus Christ, help me!”

Then the dragon came back and tried to bite her again. But she was fed up with that nonsense! She prayed!

Push speech output button, “Lord Jesus Christ, help me!”

Then she made her Cross, picked up the hammer, and beat the dragon on the head until he puffed away and left her be.

Have Marina beat the dragon over the head. Then put the dragon out of cell/away from her.

Like St. Marina, we can ask God for help when things are really hard. Let's remember her prayer.

Someone takes a turn with the prayer button.

We can also be like Marina in her good habits. She had a lot of ways she showed her love for God and other people, and those habits gave her strength so her hammer destroyed the dragon with God's help.

Hold up a pool noodle hammer.

Let's write "pray," on our hammer, because St. Marina prayed a lot.

Write "pray" on the noodle.

What else can we do to show our love for God and each other? Let's write some things that make us stronger with God.

See if anyone points or has an idea. They will likely say "pray" again or push the button. Go with it. Say, "Yes! We can ask Christ to help." Write "Lord, help" on the noodle.

If they say something else or hold up a candle or point to a prayer schedule or the room, name it out loud and write it down. "Yes! Coming to class." "Yes! The Our Father!" "Yes! Candles." And so on.

Offer an option. Watch the kids for clues as to their thoughts, which might look like them looking towards something, touching something, or pushing the button again. If they touch an icon or light, you can say, "Yes! Kiss icons," and so on with whatever they indicate through their movements or attention.

I feel God's strength when I sing. I'm going to write "Singing" on the hammer.

I feel God's strength when I go to church. I'm writing "church" on the hammer.

I feel God's strength when I receive communion. I'm writing, "Communion."

I feel God's strength when I give an offering to the poor. Write, "Alms."

I remember that St. Marina made her Cross. I'm writing, "Make my cross."

Hold up the hammer.

Wow! That looks really strong. I am strong with God's help when I, "[list the things you wrote]." Let's see if this hammer will work against the dragon.

Get dragon back out and bop him on the head.

Huh! It worked! But I'm a little tired. It would help if you all would hit the dragon with the hammer, too. Let's take turns.

Let the kids take turns bashing the dragon. When it's your turn again, exaggerate a bit.

See if they want another turn. If so, let them hit the dragon while you name the things on the hammer again, narrating along the lines of:

You are strong with God like St. Marina when you pray and make your cross and go to church and kiss icons and give to the poor and say, "Lord, help!"

When the kids are all done, press the speech output button again. While it says the little prayer, bop the dragon one last time and put a blanket/scarf over him.

Optional version: Use a little peg doll and finger puppet dragon to act out the script. Still bop the dragon with the big hammer, though. It's engaging.



Trap the Dragon

This game gives us a way to act out almsgiving and to illustrate Christ's teaching that you cannot serve God and mammon and the teaching in I Timothy that "the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil" (I Timothy 6:10). Every time you give money to the poor, it adds weight that sinks the dragon further away so it cannot rise against you.

It is good to overcome greed by means of generosity and to overcome the presumptuous one by means of acting with the mercy and rightness of God, Who gives to all of us freely.

Materials: dragon puppet or large dragon toy, cardboard box or basket large enough to go over the dragon and sturdy enough to hold the weight of the coins, "poor box" which can be a tray labeled "alms for the poor" or a little box with a slot, a couple of pounds of fake gold coins, and little drawstring bags to hold the money (or a bowl if you're improvising). (I will tell the story as if there's a basket and a bag of gold pieces.)

Speech output button: Freely you have received; freely give. and/or the same from the St. Marina lesson.

Act it Out:

Beforehand, put a few fake coins in your pocket in case kids commandeer the prop later. Conspicuously place a small drawstring bag (or two) of gold near where you are standing. Hold up a dragon puppet and make him growl and act threatening. Have another adult hold up a basket. Make the dragon squirm away from the basket.

Oh, no! The dragon is being mean again. We have to get him in that basket. What would St. Marina do? I know! Everyone, make your cross!

People make their crosses. The other teacher traps the dragon. You pretend to have to hold it down.

We need something to hold it down. Hmm. What do dragons like best?

Another teacher can say, “gold” after several seconds pause, or you can say it as though you just thought of it.

“Gold.” Aha! Yes! Dragons LOVE gold. They try to get people to love gold instead of other people. But God told us to give away extra things we have to help the poor. Ah! Here’s an alms box/tray. Whatever we put in here will go to the poor!

Place “alms” box on top of the basket. The coins will go in there.

Does anyone see any gold around here?

When someone finds the gold, gesture for some of it. Still pretend you’re struggling to keep the basket closed.

Let’s give a piece of the gold to the poor. Here. Set it on top of the basket.

They place the coin, and you stop wiggling the basket for a few seconds.

That seemed to have zapped the dragons strength.

Wiggle the basket again.

Oh, no! It’s trying again. Quick! Everyone bring some coins to give to the poor.

Have a helper distribute coins to each child and some to you, too. Or use the coins from your pocket. Keep wiggling the basket a little until each person has placed a coin on top of the basket.

Let’s give them to the poor. Here. Put them in the box/tray on top of the basket.

When everyone has placed their alms, make the dragon be still.

It worked! The dragon runs away when we act like God. God gives freely, and evil runs away when we give freely, too.

Set any additional coins in the box/tray. Offer high fives.

We did it! By sharing with the poor, we took away the strength of the dragon.

Optional Activities:

These are really just for fun; there's no lesson besides beating up the dragon like the saints and angels. You can add a small amount of learning by having the kids push a speech output button(s) saying, "Christ is Lord!" or the simpler "Lord, help!" or "Most Holy Theotokos, save us!" before they hit the dragons.

Inflatable dragon with foam swords

Inflate one of those giant Halloween dragons. Have the kids take turns wearing angel wings and hitting the dragon with pool noodles.

Dragon piñata

This requires a safe place to hang a piñata such as an enclosed playground with a swingset or a covered area where a long rope can be tossed over a rafter. It's important that the rope be long enough for the rope-holder to be ten feet (3m) away from the person swinging, and for all participants to be able to stay at least 3m/10 ft away from the person swinging.

Fill a dragon-shaped piñata (such as this one: <https://amzn.to/4qwxabi>) with safe toys like bouncy balls (large enough to not choke and small enough to fit in the piñata) (these for instance: <https://amzn.to/4gAbMNT>) and allergy-

sensitive candy such as YumEarth lollipops. (We like these:

<https://amzn.to/4gg9Wmt>)

For safety amongst kids with lower motor control, you might consider allowing everyone to bash the piñata with pool noodles, then have an “archangel” teacher drop it to the ground and break it open for the prizes.

Otherwise, with enough room for safety so no one is in range, the kids take turns hitting the piñata three times each, turns given from smallest child to largest, until the dragon breaks open. Give out the prizes.

NOVEMBER SAINTS LESSONS

These lessons can be used any time this month. Remember that keeping the basic pattern of icons-active prayer with buttons/lights/scarf-sensory tools like the flower bin lesson, making churches with the transparent tiles-music-big art is the bigger deal than whether a lesson changes week to week.

Consistent pattern gives predictability and helps apraxic kids (people whose motor planning makes speaking and other coordinated activities more challenging) to motor plan and to be able to participate more cumulatively over time.

If you don't use one of these this year, that's ok. You can also pick up the angels one after Christmas or Annunciation when there are other Synaxes of Archangels.

Cosmas and Damian the Holy Unmercenary Physicians

(Nov. 1) but can be remembered any time. There are many Holy Unmercenary Healer saints, so some of this lesson can be repeated at other times.

Speech buttons: "God helps us take care of each other. " "Lord have mercy, Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy."

Optional button song (about 20 seconds): "Holy Unmercenary and Miraculous Physicians, visit us when we are sick, and treat us. You have received without paying, so without payment, give to us." [or version used in your church- this is the Philoptochos patron song]

Materials: Finger puppets and/or other animal toys; crepe paper streamer, scissors. (Find the white crepe paper in the birthday section of a grocery store or Walmart or dollar stores. Use any little animal toys; I used Folkmanis finger puppets and Calico Critters for ours because we have them on hand in our bookstore dollhouse.)

Prepare: Roll tiny bandages by cutting lengths of white crepe streamer into thinner strips (cutting each regular strip in half or thirds, about a foot long). You can have some of the students with more dexterity try to roll the bandages, and also have at least three per student prepared ahead of time. Apply the bandages to the finger puppet animals or any small stuffed animals you might have.

Story to tell while everyone is putting bandages on the animals:

Some saints studied medicine and healing. They asked God to help them heal people and animals. When people could not pay for medicine and help, these saints helped anyway. They are healers and physicians (another word for doctors). God helped them learn to care for people and animals and gave the Holy Spirit to heal them even more. We call these saints Holy Unmercenary Healers and Physicians.

Use speech output of the song, or sing it through once.

We can pray for each other's health, too. We ask for good health in the Divine Liturgy. We can thank God for our medicine when we need it. We thank God for our speech output buttons and talkers. We thank God for our sensory gym and the playground. We can thank God for the people who help us with therapies. We can thank God for our bodies. We thank God for our pets and the veterinarians who help them.

Use speech output buttons.

Large Scale Artwork: This is a good day to also work on coloring the big icon of the Holy Theotokos with the people with disabilities (The Most Holy Theotokos the Joy of All Who Sorrow). (attached below)

What to Add This Week: It's also a good week to introduce new fidgets like the pain/pickle/cactus fidget and sensory strings and twirly lights, just to give the kids regulatory options. You can talk about how stims are helpful to our health, and thank God for them, too.

Attached: a couple of photos from when I tested the lesson.

Note: Another thing you can do is put bandaids on arms if you have bandaid-loving kids.





Holy Archangel Michael and the Bodiless Powers (Nov. 8) But can be done any time this month; the Nativity season has a lot of angels, so it's ok if it's later and fresher on their minds.

Speech Output Buttons: "Do Not Be Afraid! God is With Us!" and "Holy! Holy! Holy!" (or Agios, Agios, Agios since mostly they hear it in Greek in church)

Materials: Gold or silver shiny wrapping paper, scissors, stickers (gold stars OR round ones to write on OR flowers or stars/anything natural with a church association), whiteboard marker, Icon of Archangel Michael (attached), any other angel icons you'd like to highlight.

Prepare: Before class, unroll a few feet of the shiny wrapping paper. Fold it in half and cut out the shape of wings as in the photo (no need to imitate all the writing; this was an example with real students, some of which were idiosyncratic). Open it back up and lay it shiny side up on the table or floor. You can also have one on the table and one on the floor.

Activities: If you have floor wings, kids can lie down and take their photo as an angel if they want. If on table, you can either write some of the things angels do on the wings with marker as you say them or write them on stickers ahead of time and have the kids put the stickers on as you say them. OR you can just use star stickers or pretty stickers, and kids can slap the stickers on the wings to decorate them as you name things angels do. They can push the speech output buttons as you add the stickers and/or play on floor to pretend to be angels. You can also hold up the wings and let them stand in front of the wings.

Tell them:

We have icons of holy angels because they are part of God's holy household. Some angels hold spheres to show that they look after us. Some angels tilt their head towards Christ or the Holy Theotokos. Some of them hold holy

symbols. They are God's servants and help people to be safe and to know God.

Add stickers/writing as you say:

Angels look after us! They bring us messages. They sing "Holy! Holy! Holy!"

Angels love us. Angels say, "Do not be afraid! God is with you." Angels protect us. Angels help keep us safe. Angels defeat evil.

We do it, too!

We can also be like the angels and say, "Do not be afraid! God is with us!"

(push buttons)

We can sing with the holy angels, "Holy! Holy! Holy!"

(push buttons)

Song to consider: Gigi Shadid's [Peter on the Water \(AKA "Do not be afraid!"\)](https://www.goarch.org/documents/32058/5154903/Sing-Along-with-Gigi+03_23_2020.pdf/ea729d22-b6ac-4fce-b67b-54e2097505f8)

Words here: [https://www.goarch.org/documents/32058/5154903/Sing-](https://www.goarch.org/documents/32058/5154903/Sing-Along-with-Gigi+03_23_2020.pdf/ea729d22-b6ac-4fce-b67b-54e2097505f8)

[Along+with+Gigi+03_23_2020.pdf/ea729d22-b6ac-4fce-b67b-54e2097505f8](https://www.goarch.org/documents/32058/5154903/Sing-Along-with-Gigi+03_23_2020.pdf/ea729d22-b6ac-4fce-b67b-54e2097505f8)

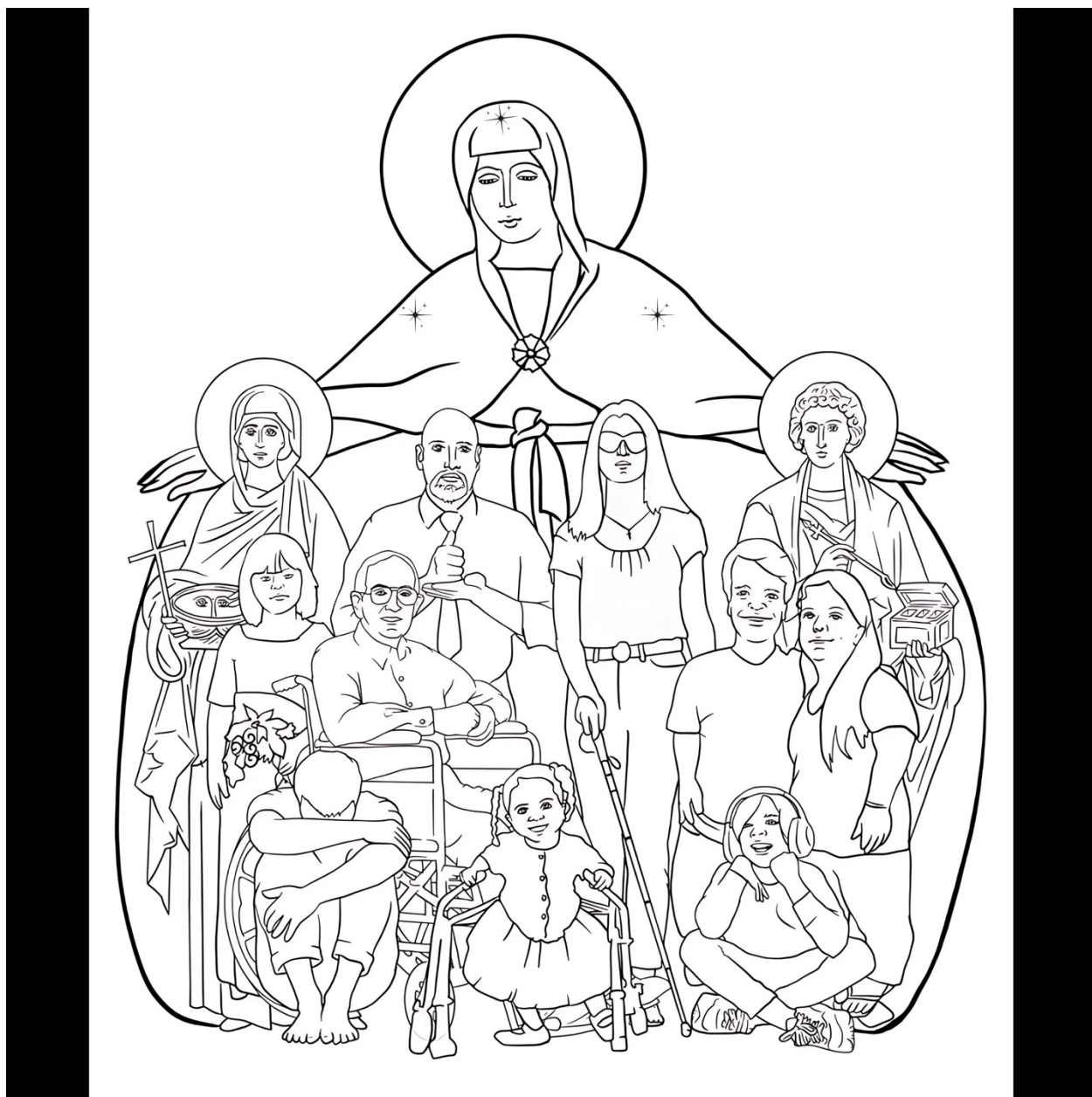
YouTube of the Song: [https://youtu.be/X_TRgq_EoEg?si=a2lp5S4atCmV-](https://youtu.be/X_TRgq_EoEg?si=a2lp5S4atCmV-CHg)

[CHg](https://youtu.be/X_TRgq_EoEg?si=a2lp5S4atCmV-CHg)

The chorus to this one is very on brand for angels even though it is not specifically about angels.







Also as printable PDF here: <https://summerkinard.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/08/line-drawing-theotokos.pdf>

You can have your favorite print shop (we like Banners on the Cheap) print the PDF at 3'x5' (or thereabouts) for group use.

Take Home Saint Lesson: St. Martin of Tours (November 11)

Materials: throw blankets, communication board printout included below or at the following link:

<https://summerkinard.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/08/stmartinandbeggar.pdf>

Story: St. Martin was a soldier who wore a warm cloak as part of his uniform. One day as he was riding along on his horse, he saw a naked beggar by the side of the road. Struck with pity, St. Martin got down from his horse. He cut his warm cloak in half and gave half of it to the beggar. He put the other half on and rode on.

That night, Our Lord came to Martin in a dream and revealed that the beggar was actually Christ Himself! St. Martin felt the great compassion of God toward himself and everyone, and he became a Christian known for his generous giving.

Act it Out: Read the story out loud and act out the lesson. Use the Boardmaker communication board to point at the sequence as you go.

Gather two throw blankets and have one person wear them like a cloak.

Have another family member pretend to be cold. (You can also use a doll.) You can say, “Brr!” and say the “cold” person or the doll is cold.

Pause when St. Martin divides his cloak in half, and take off the second throw blanket from the person wearing them.

Give the second throw blanket to cold person/doll.

Pretend to sleep. Make elaborate silly snoring sounds like, “Honk shoe me me me.”

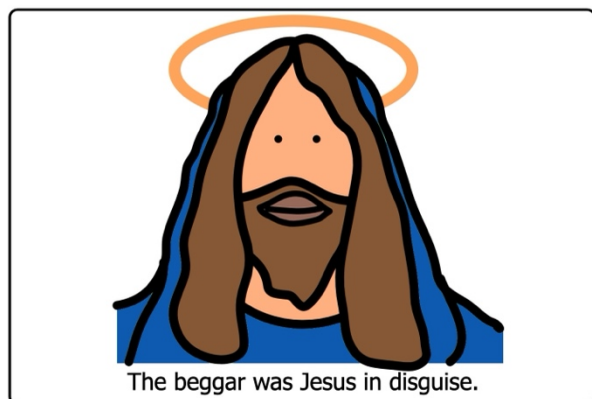
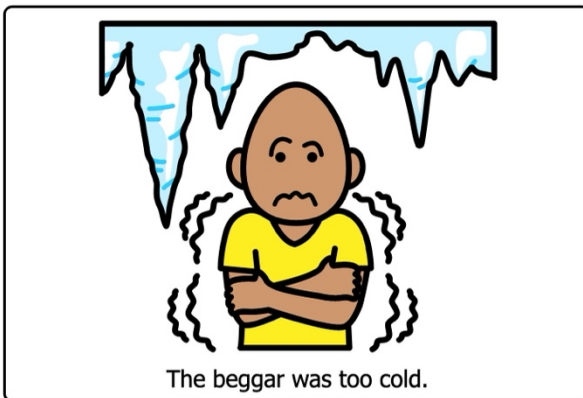
Have the person who was cold stand up and hold up their arms.

Point and act surprised. "It's Jesus in disguise!"

Use the communication board to point at Jesus.

Connect it to seasonal giving: If your family likes to make food for others at the holidays or give food to food banks or other charitable giving, connect this lesson to your family customs. Tell them, "We give a dollar a day to the food bank during the Nativity Fast because hungry people are like Our Christ in disguise." (Or whatever your habit is, for instance, making cookies for neighbors or giving a teacher gift or anything you do kindly without repayment.)

Saint Martin an the Beggar



Close to God, Close to Each Other

High Support Catechism lesson

Background:

Why do we also say in the Creed that we believe in One Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, when we are mostly confessing our faith in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? We are saved together, as the whole Body. We cannot love God if we don't love each other, and God's love helps us love each other, too!

We grow closer to God as we grow closer to each other in love.

We become like God by learning to love like God, with humility and mercy. The more we practice and participate in that love through loving actions, praying, and Holy Communion, the more we grow to be like God. That makes us closer to the great love of God.

Loving actions towards our neighbors draw us closer to God and also draw us closer to our neighbors.

Instagram reel illustrating this lesson:

https://www.instagram.com/reel/Db82eIFR532/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsi=MzRIODBiNWF1ZA==

Materials:

Jumbo Expand-a-ball (aff. link <https://amzn.to/3TMFKGR>)

6-inch LED light ball (aff link <https://a.co/d/og3gT7Gs>)

Scarves to hold between hands (can be these or any used in dance)

<https://amzn.to/3UbQnmX>

Optional modification for lower motor control: sew ahead of time or use large safety pins to pin on scrunchies to the ends of the scarves so kids can loop them over their wrists.

Bulk scrunchies <https://amzn.to/4wsboXM>

Large safety pins <https://amzn.to/4xveueo>

Optional icon of Christ

Optional halo for dressup: <https://amzn.to/4i4eYne>

Fake bread/food squishy for giving food to poor (will be used in other lessons, too): <https://amzn.to/4ciqMyx>

Speech output button with simple prayer: Lord, have mercy.

Activity One: Growing Closer to the Light

The early church described growing closer to God as being like fire entering into iron. The closer the iron gets to the fire, the more the fire fills the iron.

Note for those who can be around fire safely: If you have a church campout or bonfire/s'mores night or the option of showing the kids the charcoal used in the censer, you can point out the way the fire fills the coals by blowing on them a little to make them glow.

Get out the light inside the expanding ball and show them:

Pretend the light is God. The little nodes on the ball are people. When we act in love to each other, we grow closer to each other. And look! We grow closer to the light of God at the same time!

Demonstrate this simply by saying, “When the outside gets closer to the inside, every part gets closer together.” Show the ball expanding and contracting around the central light. Let the kids help. “When we are kind to each other like God is kind to us, we get closer to God and each other.”

Especially if after Pentecost or for parishes dedicated to the Holy Trinity that will hear this hymn every week, sing this hymn:

Blessed are You, o Christ our God. You sent down the Holy Spirit onto the fishermen, and you gave them knowledge and wisdom in everything, And through them, as in a net you caught the whole world. O Lover of Humanity, Glory to You.

The outer ball is like the net in which the Holy Spirit catches the whole world. The world can tell we are Christians by our love, because we share the same love of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We catch the whole world in God’s love when we act in love.

Game: Closer or Further?

Stand in a circle. Hold the scarves in between each person, so that each person is holding the ends of two scarves. Get as far away from each other (arms extended if possible) as is comfortable for each person. Have someone dressed like Jesus in the center OR have an icon in the center or someone holding up an icon of the Lord. Practice stepping forward towards Christ. Point out that you got closer together, too. (If someone is in a chair or immobile, move so they are a fixed point.) Go back to being far apart.

Some practices will make us closer to Christ, and some further away.

What if we say our prayers?

Have someone push the speech output prayer.

Let's try it together. "Lord, have mercy." (repeat pushing the button, too)

That makes us closer! Everyone step forward towards Christ.

Oh, wow! That made us closer to each other, too.

What if we give food for someone hungry?

(Hand some fake foods to the person being Christ.)

Everyone step forward!

Ow, wow! We are closer to each other!

What if we TAKE food from someone hungry?

(Take food away from Christ.)

Everyone step backwards!

Oh, no. We all got further apart, too.

What if we go to church?

Everyone step forward!

That makes us closer to God and each other!

What if we pray together **again** and **again**?

Push speech output prayer. Let everyone have a turn with it.

Yay! That made us closer to God and each other.

What if we sing songs?

Step forward!

Singing together makes us closer to each other and God!

At this point you're probably close enough. It's a good time to send everyone to the singing circle to sing songs. You can sing the Pentecost hymn or any class favorites.

Let's go sing now!

Sensory-Centered Nativity

This Nativity curriculum is demonstrated and explained with text, photos, and videos here:

<https://summerkinard.com/2025/12/12/sensory-centered-nativity-play/>

The webpage for the Sensory-Centered Nativity includes the station printables, and they also follow this reference page.

SAINT NICHOLAS LESSONS (Inclusive)

Saint Nicholas is such a well-loved saint! Likely you will be celebrating his feast with the whole parish, so I have included generally accessible lessons and ideas here as well as a higher support sand bin storytelling option. (When I was a Christian education director I gave these resources out to our families and teachers, and I used the higher support lesson in my class.)

Books to Recommend to Families to Read/View at Home:

Here's a link to one of the most famous stories (Nine Gold Coins by Jim Forest) about St. Nicholas' good acts:

<https://www.stnicholascenter.org/how-to-celebrate/resources/stories-poems/stories/audio-stories/nine-gold-coins>

There's also a read aloud video of The St. Nicholas Day Snow by Charlotte Riggle, which explains why there's more than one version of the St. Nicholas shoe/stocking story: <https://youtu.be/l6xZOOYcluw>

If you would like to focus on St. Nicholas in your class time, here are some age-appropriate hands-on tie-ins to make a lesson of it:

FOR CHILDREN & Higher Support Needs: Tell the story of St. Nicholas and giving money to the poor family

Materials: St. Nicholas peg doll, three simple girl peg dolls, a man peg doll, metallic gold paper and hole punch to make doll-sized gold coins, wooden house walls, soft play sand, tray to hold sand, houses, and peg dolls. Optional: chocolate coins, play gold money (depending on whether food allergies and putting money in mouth are issues for the class)

Wooden house walls: <https://amzn.to/3ULxjfc>

Optional soy-free milk chocolate coins: <https://amzn.to/4irYopN>

Optional play gold money: <https://amzn.to/4hWEJpE>

Instructions for a simple St. Nicholas peg doll here (note: you can also use regular markers or crayons—I almost always decorate peg dolls with crayons or colored pencils, and it's way easier!): <https://www.stnicholascenter.org/how-to-celebrate/resources/crafts/figures/peg-saint>

Speech Output Button: God helps us to take care of each other!

Prepare: Make three simple girl peg dolls and a man doll for the poor family. Use a hole punch on gold paper to make gold coins. If the children are able, allow them to use the hole punch to make gold coins.

Act It Out: *Tell the story and let the children act it out with the dolls by tossing the gold coins through the window you use for the poor family.*

Saint Nicholas inherited a large fortune. He had his inheritance made into nine gold coins.

Hold up 9 pieces of either fake money, gold wrapped chocolate coins, or gold paper coins, whatever is safest for your group. If you have your peg doll in hand, you can let the kids help you count out nine little gold paper coins.

1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9 Coins!

But Saint Nicholas had everything he needed. So he asked God what to do with the coins.

Have the St. Nicholas doll stand amongst the coins, and model praying with your hands. Introduce the family peg dolls and set them in the sand tray by the smallest house wall.

St. Nicholas wasn't sure what to do at first, but he knew something about God!

Have a child push the speech output button: God helps us to take care of each other!

St. Nicholas heard about a family that did not have any money! The young women had people they wanted to marry, but they did not have the money to get married! If they could not get married, they would have to go and become slaves. They were scared. Their dad was scared.

Make the peg dolls "talk" this interchange:

Father: Oh, no, girls! We are out of money.

Girls: But, Dad, if we cannot find money to get married, we will have to go be servants.

Father: Come, girls. Let's pray to God.

Girls: Yes! God will help us.

That very night, as the family prayed to God before they went to sleep, St. Nicholas was walking past their window, asking God what he should do with his inheritance coins.

Have St. Nicholas pause outside their window and pray, "God, what should I do?"

Have the family inside say, "God, please help us with the girls' dowries so they can marry."

St. Nicholas heard the family's need, and immediately he felt the compassion of God for them. He knew what to do!

Give out the little gold coins to the children. Tell them to get ready.

Saint Nicholas waited until the family was asleep, and he tossed three of the coins through their window!

Put three of the coins through the window. Let kids toss some of their coins through the window, too.

But, uh-oh! He woke the family! He snuck away before they found him.

Show St. Nicholas hiding around another house wall.

But the next night, he came back. He tossed more of the coins through the window!

Put three of the coins through the window. Let kids toss some of their coins through the window, too.

But, uh-oh! He woke the family! He snuck away before they found him.

Show St. Nicholas hiding around another house wall.

But the next night, he came back. He tossed more of the coins through the window! Now his coins were all gone.

Put three of the coins through the window. Let kids toss some of their coins through the window, too.

Hold up empty hands when all the coins are tossed in.

The family of young women were all able to get married and not have to become slaves. Their father was grateful, and so were the girls. They all praised God! And St. Nicholas was grateful, too! He had been able to help God take care of his people.

Let as many children as wish push the speech output button: God helps us take care of each other!

End: You can end the lesson with the usual surprise of treats in the children's shoes in the hallway, and/or time the ending with the visit of St. Nicholas to your class.

Optional: Sing the St. Nicholas song/hymn if your church has one, or you can sing an American Christmas song about St. Nicholas. Find some here:

<https://www.stnicholascenter.org/how-to-celebrate/resources/music/songs>

For tweens & teens: (This is an inclusive lesson, but it's not as high support.) Bring real silver or gold heirlooms or plastic gold coins to pass around as you talk about the huge wealth represented by gold coins. (Read the 9 Gold Coins story ahead of time so you can summarize the story in a shorter class, and have the teens act it out as you narrate the story, after they have touched real heirlooms to get an idea of the level of expense/value.)

If you bring real family heirlooms, tell their story and their value to you as well as how much they're worth in money. Why? Because St. Nicholas gave away his family fortune for Christ's sake to save the young women of another family.

- Why would St. Nicholas give away so much wealth so easily?
- What was St. Nicholas trying to buy by helping people so generously? Act out the story and come back to this.

Act out the story briefly, assigning the roles of young women, the dad, and St. Nicholas. You can bring in a few pairs of boots to line up for the Nicholas character to aim at with toy gold coins (linked above). Ask the sleeping family to pretend to snore, and ham it up with like, "Honk shoe mimimi," and so on. When St. Nicholas misses or makes noise tossing in the coins, have the family snort and wake up. St. Nicholas has to hide and try again. If you want, you can even have people trade out being St. Nicholas every time one Nicholas wakes the family up.

Return to the question: What was St. Nicholas trying to buy by helping people so generously? (Note: it wasn't notoriety or fame, because he was hiding from the family.)

Discuss: What are ways that you can help relieve others' hardship? (For example: Donating to food banks, bringing food to coffee hour, buying a gift card to donate to someone in need, Helping your parents clean up around the house, sharing your gifts of music or organization, etc.)

Optional Ending Game: After students have lined up their shoes outside the classroom in the hall, take off your shoes in the class. Using a little bag of real coins or fake gold coins, take turns tossing the money towards the shoes. How loud is it when you miss?

Optional: Sing the St. Nicholas song/hymn if your church has one, or you can sing an American Christmas song about St. Nicholas. Find some here:

<https://www.stnicholascenter.org/how-to-celebrate/resources/music/songs>

Note: Why props and acting it out for teens? Having a tangible focus during lessons engages the full attention of students and, importantly, forms long term memories! Teens especially love to learn by acting out stories. Because of their developmental needs, letting them enter the story and try it out will help them make more sense of it than other methods of teaching. You can have discussions as deep as you'd like, as long as they can touch the props and enter the story at the same time. Props actually encourage conversation and focus!

St. Hervé and his wolf (June 17)

Materials: wolf stuffy or puppet (like this one: <https://amzn.to/4gd5dRi>), halo for the saint, cane or sunglasses to represent St. Hervé's blindness (or invite someone blind to play St. Hervé in the skit), a simple step in dog harness to represent the plow harness (like this one: <https://amzn.to/4cChoHA>), optional harp (like this one: <https://amzn.to/3RNImDP>) or pretend harp (like this one: <https://amzn.to/4hC1hvP>), speech output button recorded with the refrain of the polyeleos "For His mercy endures forever. Alleluia!"

Optional Music:

Have a device primed to play the Youtube video of this hymn about the love of Jesus like Paradise, "Kantik ar baradoz" or "Hymn of Paradise," attributed to St. Hervé: https://youtu.be/s5I5vuFPnro?si=h_bUyXPrLiQ5s_-Z

Translation Here: <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/ar-baradoz-paradise.html>

If you use the song, print out the lyrics and translation. You might have it playing on low between skits if you are doing a skit rotation of several saints' lives for a larger event.

ACT IT OUT:

Have the person playing St. Hervé stand with their halo on as well as the sunglasses or cane.

Narrator: St. Hervé (Harvey) was born blind. He grew up in a musical household. His father died when he was young, and St. Hervé inherited his father's harp.

(Hand harp to Hervé by placing it in his hands directly.)

Narrator: Hervé's uncle was an abbot of a monastery. After his father's death, Hervé's uncle sent him to live with a trusted and learned hermit, and his mother entered a women's monastery. He sang hymns about the saints, the Holy Mother of God, and the great love of God.

(Hervé pretends to play the harp.)

Narrator: When he was a teenager, Hervé went to study in his uncle's monastery, where he learned to be a teacher and a singer, teaching people through both sermons and music.

Have someone push the speech output button.

Speech output button (singing): "For His mercy endures forever. Alleluia!"

Narrator: Hervé liked to take care of animals. Like other monks, he took his turn plowing the fields. Even though St. Hervé could not guide him, he had a faithful donkey who would plow the rows straight while St. Hervé held the plow steady. One day a hungry wolf attacked the donkey and killed it. But having compassion on the wolf, St. Hervé preached about the mercy of God who takes care of everyone and even gives food to wild animals.

Push speech output button.

Narrator: The sermon was so sweet and full of the love of God that the wolf repented. He stepped into the harness left behind by the donkey and pulled the plow with St. Hervé and accompanied the saint for the rest of the animal's life.

Put the little harness on the wolf.

Push the speech output device.

Have the wolf and St. Hervé move a little together, like a little dance in place rocking back and forth.

Narrator: Because the wolf was St. Hervé's faithful companion from then on, and because the wolf pulled the plow for him, many people believe this is the first story of a saint with a guide dog!

Acknowledgement: Charlotte Riggle, author of the book of lives of disabled saints including St. Herve, ***That God's Works Might Be Revealed*** (Park End Books, 2025), helped me by telling me about St. Hervé and about his song!

Amma Syncletiki of Alexandria (January 5)

Amma means “Mother,” and we use the term for holy women teachers. Amma Syncletiki was a holy ascetic who prayed in the desert. She lived a long life of prayer and kindness. Amma Syncletiki advised nuns under her care. She was known for her hospitality and courage. When Arians were trying to find and harm St. Athanasius, Amma Syncletiki hid St. Athanasius for a whole year.

The Desert Fathers and Mothers were known for trying to pray without ceasing. One of the ways desert mothers and fathers prayed while also taking care of their bodily needs was to pray while they wove ropes, baskets, and palm cloths. They would sell these items for a little food for themselves, more food for guests, and to give about half of their money to the poor.

When they were working, they prayed.

When they were setting aside time to sing prayers, they prayed.

When they were sleeping or eating, the poor prayed for them!

Lesson

Materials green yarn

Speech output device: lord have mercyx3

Speech button 2: Psalm 23

Praying while braiding rope or weaving palm cloth

Use toes to hold the ropes. Braid together while praying

Can also sing the polyeleos while braiding

Working with the hands while praying allowed the desert mothers and fathers to pray without ceasing

Saint Ariadne (September 18)

Materials: multiple (at least 3) speech output buttons recorded with the prayer below, statue of the Holy Theotokos or tall icon of the Holy Theotokos, large blue crepe paper (like this: <https://amzn.to/4gJ35kw>), clear or masking tape, Ariadne peg doll, peg dolls each person decorates to look like themselves, optional washi stickers to decorate peg dolls and/or Mary's cloak of protection, crayons or colored pencils to decorate the peg dolls, optional push lights under the cloak.

Prepare: Before class, tuck the large blue crepe paper around the statue or tall icon of the Holy Theotokos so that it looks like a shelter with Our Lady at the center. If you prefer, go ahead and draw simple faces on the peg dolls. Have crayons/colored pencils ready for the kids to decorate their dolls if they're able. It's ok to assist them. When you know there are people with lower motor control, it can be considerate to have one or two standard, large sized crayons and allow them to choose one of these colors for you or a helper to quickly color in the body of the peg doll with their choice. But it's 100% ok for students to make light scribbles on the pegs as their decoration. You might also be ready to hand them washi stickers to press onto their pegs.

Tell the Story: With the St. Ariadne peg doll, act out her story, using gestures while you do so, for instance, shaking your head no when her boss tells her to pray to fake gods. When she runs to the mountain in the story, make her run beside the "cloak" you made of crepe paper. When the mountain opens, hide Ariadne under the cloak of the Holy Theotokos.

The Story: Saint Ariadne was a Christian servant in a pagan household. The people who bossed her around told her she was supposed to go and worship some fake gods instead of Christ. Ariadne said, "No." She stayed home and

prayed instead as a Christian, to the Holy Trinity, to God the Father, with the Holy Spirit, in the name of Jesus Christ the Son. Her boss was angry at her and tried to capture her. Ariadne ran to a mountain and prayed to Christ for help. The mountain opened up and hid her! The bad guys could not catch her.

When we ask the Holy Theotokos for help, she is like a mountain protecting us, too. In the Psalms and prophets, our Panagia the Theotokos is called the Uncut Mountain and the Rock from which Christ was hewn. She surrounds us with her loving protection just like the mountain saved St. Ariadne.

The oldest prayer we have outside of the scriptures is asking for the Mother of God to protect us. It goes like this:

Beneath thy compassion, We take refuge, O Mother of God: do not
despise our petitions in time of trouble, but rescue us from dangers,
only pure one, only blessed one.

Let's all push it at the same time.

Have everyone push their speech output prayer button on 3 (it's ok if it's a bit off sync).

The prayer coming from all around will feel like being surrounded by prayer.

Now let's take our peg dolls and see if they can hide, too. Press the buttons!
Then we will bring our peg dolls to the Mother of God.

As the prayer begins to pray all around them, have the students bring their peg dolls to set under the cloak of the Holy Mother.

Let's do it again! Everybody bring your dolls back to the buttons. (*wait for them*)
And...push the button!

As the prayer starts, gesture the children to bring their dolls to hide under Our Lady's cloak again.

She always protects us!



**Beneath thy compassion,
We take refuge,
O Mother of God:
do not despise our petitions
in time of trouble,
but rescue us from dangers,
only pure one,
only blessed one.**