

Learning By Doing: Worship as Curriculum
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Introductory Remarks – Situating Our Discussion

I want to thank Professor Joyce Mercer and the other members of the planning committee for the invitation to speak here today. I'm looking forward to the day's program, and I'm honored to speak here at SFTS, which has long been committed to fine scholarship and teaching about the practice of Christian Education in the work of David Ng and now in Professor Mercer's work as well. My name is Carol Jacobson and I am the assistant professor of Christian Education at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary. I also direct a program of theological education for high school students on our campus, where twice a year high school students come to our campus to live, study theology and engage in service projects that benefit local Lutheran congregations.

I'd like to begin this morning by reading to you the quote on the top of your handout. I think these few sentences really open up the topic we're going to discuss together and describe elegantly something I think we all know is true.

The worshiping communities in which children participate exert significant influence on their religious development. How members regard and participate in the liturgy, how the community structures and lives its life, how members regard and respect each other, and how adults regard and respect children – all provide models and experiences about which children think, feel, wonder, and muse. – A. Roger and Gertrude G. Gobbel, *The Bible – A Child's Playground*

So, “the worshiping communities in which children participate exert significant influence on their religious development.” Maybe these words strike a chord for you, and even have you remembering your own experiences as a child in church. Maybe this is something you hope is going to be true for your own children and grandchildren. Maybe this insight is the reason you decided to attend this event – how adults treat and welcome children in church has an effect on children, and you want to consider the ways in which your own worshiping community “regards and respects children” as participants on Sunday morning. Is participation in worship something children “think, feel, wonder, and muse” about? Absolutely! And that's what is exciting about thinking about worship as a kind of curriculum for the Christian Education of children. Participation in worship taps into children's intellectual and emotional curiosity and opens them up for the work of the Holy Spirit in their young lives. But before we get too far along here, let's pause for a moment to define two words that we'll be using a lot today.

The first is **worship**. What is worship? Take a minute to think: how would you define worship if somebody asked you what it was? You would most likely have in mind the Sunday morning service where the community gathers each week to offer prayers and praises to God. That's a pretty good definition. Or, you might think that worship is our thankful response to God – a loving, communal response to God's graciousness toward us. That's pretty good too. What is worship, especially in the context of understanding worship as a kind of curriculum for Christian Education of children? I like very much the way Martin Luther defines worship. It's a lot like what we have suggested already. He says simply, "In worship our dear Lord Jesus speaks to us in his holy Word and we respond to him in prayer, praise, and thanksgiving." I like the "warm piety" of Luther's language here, and as we can see – it's a pretty good definition of what worship is. It is the experience of God speaking to us and our response to that word. So, for this morning, that will be our definition of worship.

The second is **curriculum**. What does that word mean, really? When we think of curriculum, we often usually think of the textbooks we use in order to teach somebody something. Like the materials we use to teach Sunday School classes. That's a proper use of the word, but it can't be what I mean when I speak about Christian worship as curriculum. After all, worship is not a textbook, although there are often plenty of books to be used in worship! I want to suggest a simple definition of curriculum: a course to be run. The word "curriculum" is derived from the Latin *currere*, which means to run. So, a curriculum is a course to be run. It is my hope that this basic definition of curriculum – one that emphasizes an activity rather than a textbook – helps us to begin to understand just how worship can be a curriculum – a course to be participated in on Sunday mornings. A course, perhaps, in a Christian way of living and loving in the world.

One last introductory remark about a trap to be avoided in our thinking together this morning. You remember that the Gobbel's pointed out to us that the practices of a worshipping community have a profound influence on the faith lives of its children. That's why our topic for the morning is an important one! We want our communities of faith to have *good and beneficial* influences for our children's development, right? Of course. But we mustn't let ourselves fall into the trap of thinking *causally* about the Gobbel's insight. In other words, our task for today is not to think up exactly the right things to do and say in worship so that our children will develop a good faith – free from questions, doubts, and misperceptions. No matter how hard we try, or how carefully we plan, we cannot control the faith development of our children [positive, negative, or indifferent]. As the Gobbels remind us, each child will think, feel, wonder and muse on their experiences in worship in

their own way. Each child will be opened up to God in a way that is his or her own. The Spirit blows where it wills, Paul reminds us, so we mustn't set ourselves up to feel as though our children's faith is "all up to us." We can, and should, however, carefully and prayerfully consider just how our worshiping communities regard and welcome the presence of children in our worship hour. That's our task for today!

Children Learn *In* Worship: Explicit and Implicit Learning

I want to begin then, by suggesting that children are always learning something, no matter what they are doing. And this is no less true about children as they participate in the worship hour. Children learn things in worship. The question is, what kind of things? What is it, exactly, that children are learning by participating in a worshiping community. Every Sunday, I sit with a child [my godchild, Nate] and his mother during worship. Nate is 5 years old. I am always surprised by what and how much Nate learns during church. And sometimes this is not what his mother and I think he is or should be learning! If I ever doubted that children pick up on a lot of what is going on in worship, my five years of sitting with Nate have cured me of this doubt. So often we assume that children aren't really "getting anything" out of "adult" worship – but this just isn't the case. Nate is my proof. Let me tell you two brief stories to illustrate my point here. When Nate was three years old, he was sitting on my lap one Advent Sunday before the service began. In our parish, the advent wreath is not "up front" but rather is built around the worshipers, with large candles in the four corners of the sanctuary and lots of greenery connecting these four candle stations along the outside of the pew area. By the 4th Sunday of Advent, parishioners are surrounded by candles and greenery and find themselves "inside" the wreath. This is clearly a practice that has a particular kind of theology behind it, as we in the community await the coming of the Christ child. We ourselves are in the midst of Advent – of the waiting for the fulfillment of God's promise.

Of course, nobody had ever explained this to Nate – after all, he was only three. But he had been to church each Sunday during Advent, and had eagerly awaited the lighting of the big candle each week at the beginning of church. But now, even before church had begun, Nate was already thinking about what he was learning about Advent and the coming of the Christ child. He turned to me and said "Hey!" And I said, "What?" He pointed to each of the candles [that day there were finally four candles out] and counted them for me. One, two, three, four. He paused, and I said, "That's right!" He turned to me and said, "Jesus is coming next!" I told him that was right too!

The point of this story is to illustrate that Nate was learning something in worship, even though nobody had explicitly explained to him about Advent, the promise of God, incarnation, or the waiting that characterizes the season of Advent. Still, he “knew” what was happening and what time of year it was – we were all waiting for Jesus to come! This brings me to my first point about children learning in worship – they learn things that are explicitly said and done and they learn implicitly as well – by noticing objects, hearing music and stories from the Bible, by looking at stained glass windows, by waiting for the time until all the candles are lit. So, we can say that children learn both explicitly and implicitly in worship. Explicit learning goes on when children learn in church about God and God’s love for them through the words we speak to them -- in the pew as we sit with them, in the texts of hymns and prayers, from the lectern, or in the children’s sermon. In these moments, children have the opportunity to hear Jesus speak to them in the words of the liturgy and in the proclamation of God’s word.

But so much more than this kind of explicit learning is going on during church as well. Children learn about God and about worship *implicitly* as well. That is, they take in the sights, sounds, and feelings of the worship hour and interpret them for themselves in the thoughts of their own hearts. Sometimes they tell you about them, and sometimes they don’t. So, it seems that there are at least two kinds of curriculum at work in the worship hour – the explicit curriculum and the implicit curriculum. The story that I told you about Nate counting the Advent candles is, I think, an example of an *implicit curriculum* at work in his heart during that Advent season. Which brings me to my second story about Nate – a story about explicit curriculum that went awry! Nate is a usual 5 year old, busy, curious, easily bored, and very verbal. Part of being in church with Nate, then, has been trying to get him to be aware of the rhythms of quiet times and not so quiet times during the worship hour. For awhile, Nate’s mother and I had been trying to teach Nate that prayer time was a time to be quiet in church. He shouldn’t sing then, or ask for things in a loud voice while we were praying – that’s what his mother and I meant. And Nate was getting this rhythm pretty well we thought. We had no idea *how* well he had taken our explicit instructions about being quiet during prayer to heart until a few weeks ago, when his mother offered a petition of thanksgiving during the prayers of the people. As she began to pray, all could hear Nate, with a loud whisper, remind his mother that she was supposed to be quiet and not talk during the prayer time. Yikes! Nate had “gotten” our message – a little too well. We had been explicit in our education about the wrong thing! We hadn’t explained that prayer was when people [even him!] got to talk to God and thank God. Rather we had focused on our wish that he would be quiet.

My point here, is perhaps clear. When thinking about the Sunday worship hour as a curriculum for children, teaching them about a Christian way of life, we must be attentive to the many levels at which learning occurs. Children learn about the Christian way of life by what we say, by the Bible stories we read and tell, by what we do, by how we interact with them, by seeing what the church looks like, by the pictures of Jesus they see in the windows, by seeing a cross and wondering about it, by putting their hands in the baptismal font and noticing if the adults do that too, etc. Our children are always learning about the Christian way of life in our worship services. This is good news! Good news that compels us to think and plan the worship hour with our children and their ongoing education in mind.

Children Learn *To* Worship: Meeting God In the Worship Hour

I want to shift gears a little bit here with a few remarks about another kind of learning that takes place in the worship hour. By participating in worship regularly, children learn *to* worship – to make loving and thanking God a part of every week. Maybe this seems obvious, but I want to think a bit more about this observation. Children learn to worship God best by participating in the community and its worship of God. We all know that we ourselves weren't born knowing the Presbyterian or Lutheran way of worship. It was something we learned. We learned the customs of our traditions, its theological perspectives, its pieties and practices. We grew into them. All one has to do to remember this is to watch a first-time visitor to a Christian worship service. He or she is often quite uncertain about what exactly to do, when to stand and sit, where to find the hymns, etc. Children are no different. One of the most significant ways in which worship *is* curriculum is that by worshipping, children learn what it means to have an ongoing relationship with God. They learn that *they* can and do have a relationship with God [one that often begins with their baptism] and that God loves them very much. They are allowed to give expression to their thankfulness about this as they hear and see adults expressing their own thankfulness about this. By being members of a worshipping community, children learn that God wants to meet them and love them there.

After all, the same God that wants to meet us as adults in worship is the same God that wants to meet children there as well. God desires to meet us all in worship – regardless of our age or our “level of understanding.” Although children may not be able to describe

that meeting as adults do, children must have the chance to experience meeting God. Why? Because God wants to meet them! God grants to our children a life of faith at every age. Remember what Luther said? In worship, our dear Lord Jesus speaks to us and we respond to his word in prayer, praise, and thanksgiving. This isn't true only for adults – our dear Lord Jesus wants to and does speak and work in the lives of the children in our worshiping communities. Children really experience this and want to give expression to this meeting in their own ways, even if they can't speak about it. God longs for each of us, no matter our age, to open our hearts to hear and respond to the gospel. We dare not fall into the trap the disciples did by assuming that Jesus only had time for words and encounters with adults. God desires to enter every heart and make a dwelling place there.

Children *Belong* In Worship

For these reasons, then, I want to say that I believe that children belong in worship. Certainly, I am aware that there are differences of opinion on this matter, but my conviction is that children belong in the worshiping community. As an educator and as a theologian, I have serious reservations about worshiping communities that, for example, conduct Sunday School and worship in the same hour. In this way, both children and teachers are able to worship with community only rarely, if ever. What does the experience of being a part of the community, but never being able to go to church teach our children about worship and about its importance to a life of faith? I even have reservations about worship services that include children only for a part of the worship, and ask children to leave to another activity after the “children’s sermon” without inviting them back for the offering, the prayers, the communion. How will children learn the importance of these activities in the community if they are never invited to really participant in them?

I don't wish to sound like a naïve idealist with these remarks. I am well aware that children are themselves in worship – that is, they behave as children do. I know that they are often noisy, sometimes say and do annoying or embarrassing things, and are perceived by many to disrupt the “worshipful, reverent” feeling of the service. But I am hopeful that my brief remarks about what children stand to learn and to gain by being in the worship service might lead you to conclude that thinking about the presence of children in worship primarily in terms of the disruption it may cause you or another member may not be the best

trajectory of thinking. Concentrating on the “noise” of children in worship may not be the only thing to think about when considering how your worshiping community will include children in the service, or if they will be included at all. I feel strongly that those who plan worship need to plan for children to be there – not so that they can be seen and not heard – but so that they can be invited to participate in meeting and being met by God, as we all do. So, I thought we might practice thinking about the parts of the worship service explicitly with children and their presence and participation in mind.

Which brings us to the “nuts and bolts” part of our time together this morning. Everyone should have two pieces of paper. One is a brief outline of my talk and the other is a sheet with the words “Workshop Group” at the top. Please take a look at this “Workshop Group” paper now. I would like for you to assemble in small groups around the room. All those in the “Gathering” group, should meet here. Those in the “Word” group, here. Those in the “Prayers” group, here. Those in the “Communion” group, here. And those in the “Sending” group here. Let’s gather in our groups now, and then I’ll explain what I’d like you to do in these groups.

You will see that each group has been given the task of thinking about a particular part of the worship service: **gathering**, which may include a greeting of some kind, confession and absolution, a prayer of the day, and a hymn; **word**, which may include the reading of lessons and a Psalm, the reading of the Gospel text, the sermon, and a hymn; **prayers**, which may include the creed, the prayers of the people, and the offering prayer; **communion**, which may include the Eucharistic Prayer, the words of institution, and the activities of the meal itself [including hymns]; and **sending**, which may involve a prayer, a blessing, the benediction, and a hymn. What I want you to do in these groups is to discuss the three questions I have listed on the sheet. Consider the particular part of the service I have asked you to consider and discuss the following:

- What actions and activities take place in this part of the worship service? What words are said?
- What are the theological themes and images that are present in this part of the worship service?
- What ideas do you have for ways in which children can take part in the actions, activities, and experiences in this part of the worship service?

Is this clear? Let’s take the next 15 minutes for your group discussion. Please be sure to jot down your thoughts and ideas. When we come back together in the large group, I’ll ask

each group to share a thought, observation, or idea the group came up with in the discussion. Then I'll make one last set of concluding remarks, and if there is time, we can discuss with one another any questions you may have.

Ask each group to share. Thank you all for your willingness to participate in this exercise and to engage it with so much passion and creativity!

Concluding Remarks: Adults Assisting Children In/To Worship

I want to offer just a few of my thoughts about how adults can assist children in worship and to worship. Often concerned that as adults we need to be sure that children understand the “point” of what they are doing; we try to explain worship to children instead of just inviting them to be there with us in an engaged way. Too often, we worry as adults that we should have the “right” answer to a child’s question about God or about why we do things as we do in worship. I want to suggest that we can learn to relax a bit here, and consider doing the following:

First, we must communicate to children with our words and our actions that there is **freedom and time** for them to ask questions about what we are doing in worship, either briefly in the service itself [a whisper in the ear] or certainly in the car on the way home or at mealtime. If children really are participating in worship – expect questions, encourage them, and take the time to talk together about them.

Second, adults assist children in worship and to worship by treating them with a deep **respect for and acceptance of** them as children, as members of the community, as the beloved of God. A child may come to any number of conclusions about the meaning of a particular part of worship [remember Nate and his understanding of prayers?]. Such understandings, while not what we might consider the “right” understanding, are the child’s own. In my opinion, they should not be dismissed or made fun of. As Nate’s mother and I told him – he was right that prayer time was a quiet time, but that we had forgotten to tell him everything about prayer time he needed to know. Prayer time, we said, was when we could talk to God either in our hearts or out loud. I remember that Nate was pretty interested to hear that his mother had been talking to God!

I suppose all this is to encourage that the best way in which adults can assist children in and to worship is by being an **ongoing conversation** partner with children about their

life of faith, their experiences in worship, and their ideas about God. Listen to their thoughts and their stories. Tell them some of your own. Jesus says, “Let the children come to me; do not stop them – for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.” [Mark 10:14] My prayer for all of us is that we continue to learn how to welcome children and their participation in the worshiping lives of our communities. Thank you.