Teaching children about Holy Week

by Michael Miller

The approach of another Good Friday provides Christian educators, ministers and parents another tough task: how to talk to young children about the crucifixion of Jesus.

But, some teachers and psychologists said, the solution is only two days after the problem. When you talk about the crucifixion, don't forget the resurrection. During Holy Week, Christians in the West will commemorate such events as the Last Supper, the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus.

It's explaining the crucifixion that can occasionally give some adults pause. It was a violent death, according to the accounts of the Gospels, which say that Jesus was scourged and beaten before being nailed to a cross. But it also was a key event in Christ's life that can't be ignored when discussing the Christian faith.

MESSAGE OF HOPE - Theologians say you should stress the good news about the Resurrection when teaching children about Holy Week. CNS Illustration by Scott Adrian Hinton.

"The thing is you cannot change the story, because the story certainly is what we as Christians believe, but you try to present it in a simple way," said Dawn Rivard, director of children's ministry at the Episcopal Cathedral of St. Paul in Peoria, Ill. What she and others suggested was emphasizing the Resurrection, "the good news of what happened," Rivard said.

Dr. John Day of Christian Psychological Associates agreed and also said it was a good idea to simply respond to a child's questions without offering any unsolicited information. "With young people, you give them the information they need at that moment, particularly at young ages," Day said. "To key it off of them is always the safe way to go." If they want to know more, Day said, they'll ask. "The message is one of hope, so that's the bottom line of the whole thing," he said.

Rivard said that the cathedral teachers "don't sugarcoat it, but we try not to put the main focus on (the crucifixion). We tell the story as it is and then we move on to the resurrection. Somehow that equals it out in their minds that something bad happened but something good happened, too. Even for me, I have to stop to think, 'It's Friday, but Sunday's coming.'"

She said she uses "Resurrection Eggs" with her group of children ages 3 to 8 years old. Each plastic egg contains a symbol related to Christ's death and resurrection and helps to explain the events to young children in a nonthreatening way.

Kim Meehan, staff lay minister at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Peoria, said she also explains the basics of the crucifixion to youngsters "without the blood and gore."

"That he did suffer, it was not a fun way to die, that he was innocent, but he was willing to be punished, he was willing to accept responsibility so that we wouldn't have to," Meehan said. "And often you can throw in a parental image that there are a lot of things that parents will do that are not fun, but if it's to save their kids, they'll do it," said Meehan, who oversees the church's children's education and youth programs.

The Rev. Gregory Ketcham of St. Philomena Catholic Church in Peoria said he tells children that "it was an awesome thing that Jesus did for us" when discussing the crucifixion. From kindergarten to fourth grade, he offers a "little bit lighter message," but gets into more details for those from fifth to eighth grade, Ketcham said. "I don't want to make it such a dark thing that the children are terrified of what Jesus endured for us, but I think ultimately we help children understand from our Catholic point of view that because of our sins and original sin the gates of heaven were locked" until Jesus died and rose again, the priest said.

Another challenge is explaining the pain of the crucifixion to children growing up in a society with a media saturated with violence, Meehan and others said. It's in the movies and television shows many of them watch, the video games they play, the music they listen to.

"Kids see so many images of violence where people pop right back up," Meehan said. "I've had kids that just don't understand that being hit with a bullet hurts. On their video game, the person just bounces back up."

She suggested relating it to an experience of real pain they've had, but not forgetting the hope. Always, the hope.

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