

Bike lesson: Repentance and forgiveness

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [October 23, 2002](#) issue

Children's sermons can be times for cuteness or for expressions of theological realism. Here is a story of such realism. Our parish's intern was reinforcing the theme of the day's lectionary lesson. He held up one sign that read WELCOME and another that said KEEP OUT, and let the children spell out the significance of both.

"Is there a welcome sign in front of Ascension Church?" he asked.

"No," they answered. I had never noticed that omission in the 39 years I've been a member. But I have long ago concluded that having such a word on a sign out front means nothing.

"Do *you* welcome people, especially children, here?"

"Yes." Some children said they did it through smiles, others through greetings, asking for a name or showing a stranger around.

"Is the WELCOME word something you'd use if someone different from most of you, someone of another color, would come?" the intern asked. "Yes," the children answered universally. They were too young to have learned discrimination and prejudice.

"Is the WELCOME word something you'd say if someone came who did not dress like you and who looked poor?" the intern continued. Again none of the children pointed to the "KEEP OUT" sign. They were all sure they'd WELCOME.

"Let's make it harder: Would you say WELCOME if someone came who stole your bike?" was the final question. And the answer was "No!" unanimously: KEEP OUT. The intern resumed the inquiry. "Didn't you hear the pastor's children's sermon last week on forgiveness? Jesus wants you to do and think differently. *Remember, it's all about forgiveness.*"

“No, it’s all about the bike!” a child piped up in tones that mingled hurt and anger.

We adults, now leaning forward, were eavesdropping on an important theology lesson. But there had been a slight failure of communication. Our intern had been picturing a scenario in which the thief had been apprehended, the stolen object had been returned and adjudication and repentance had occurred. He was asking, “At that stage, are *you* ready to forgive and then welcome such a person?”

The children, or at least one child, heard it differently: in his imagination the kid who had stolen his bike had not been apprehended, the bike had not been returned and, while showing up at church to be welcomed would signal something, the thief had not, to the child’s knowledge, repented or sought to right the wrong.

The little one, reminding the adult world to get its priorities and sequences right, stuck to his theme. You say it’s all about welcome and church and forgiveness? No! At least not yet. It’s all about the bike.

Writers on love, power and justice, such as the late Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr, could not have said it better. Dostoevsky and Dorothy Day spoke of love in action as a harsh and dreadful love. In the framework of the way the child pictured the scenario, there was to be no superficial and smiling “judge not” or “let him that is without sin cast the first stone” or “let’s all be nice.” Trust such a child to know better than to dispense what Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace.” Trust this child not to allow CEOs, politicians and scandalizers to get off the hook with a passive “a mistake was made.” Is it “all about forgiveness”? No! It’s about the bike!

Soon after this sermon I chanced to see a reference in *Commonweal* (September 27) to a “Catholic mantra.” The child was in line with it: “There will be no hearing without justice; no justice without truth; no truth without accountability.”