

Testing the Good Shepard

It is my very first attempt presenting Godly Play in a Religious Education class. I start with the parable of the Good Shepherd right after having participated at a three-day further education course by Dr. Rebecca Nye. This event in December 2003 had been the very beginning of Godly Play in Germany. I am anxious how my pupils with physical and intellectual needs will react to this religious educational approach. It seems obvious, that the concept is not explicitly assigned for pupils with physical and intellectual needs. Katharina, one of the children, recently had a spine surgery and is not able to sit on the ground. For those in wheel chairs, listening to the story and doing creative work on the ground is not possible. Therefore, we sit on chairs in a circle around a table. This setting sends a signal to the pupils: Something new is coming up.

During the introduction to the parable the pupils are highly attentive. Then the first object is taken out of the golden box. It's green. "There is nothing but the colour green. I wonder what this could really be?" Answer: "A green cloth." Silence. "Green stuff". Silence and once again silence. The tension smoothly changes into boredom.

Is the fantasy of the pupils paralyzed, too? I am disappointed. I had expected much more enthusiasm and playfulness. Or does the restrictedness of my wondering skills handicap their ability to respond? Then, however, as the sheep roam the sheepfold the pupil's attendance awakens. The fact of the lost sheep touches them. The Shepard takes notice of it and assures: "If one of the sheep is missing, I will go anywhere to look for the lost sheep until I find it!" He goes back to search where the good grass is, to the cool fresh waters, even to the places of danger. As he finds the sheep, he carries it back to the sheepfold and, as usual, he counts his flock. But, one is missing, again! The gate had been left open. I am shocked! How could this have happened? What else can I do, but seek the second lost sheep? The shepherd has to keep his promise!

So the shepherd goes on again, to the good grass, to the cold water and even to the dangerous places. In vain! Finally, he walks to every single pupil calling: "Where are you my dear?" No answer. "Don't be afraid! I'll come searching you!" The sheep is not to be found. No sound. The good shepherd is at the end of his patience. He is brought to a real test: Is the shepherd actually doing, what he claims? Does this apply to me, as the storyteller, too? Finally, after an endless search I can hear a deep grumbling. It comes from Bernd, a fourteen-year-old boy coming from a challenging family background: The mother psychically ill, the father

occupied day and night with three jobs. And Bernd himself is socially excluded by his classmates on behalf of his misbehaviour. Now the shepherd has got a clue of direction to move on. With the help of his stick he bridges the cleft between the green grass and Bernd's leg. He strives high to the mountain crevice at the collar of Bernd's sweater. A piece of the sheep's pelt peeks out there. The shepherd pulls at the sheep. But the crevice turns into a monster, into a wolf. The wolf catches hold of the sheep with his mouth. A bitter fight arises which costs much strength for both, the shepherd and the wolf. The shepherd is exhausted. He needs to have a break lamenting for the sheep. At full power he tries once again. The wolf finally releases the sheep. With the sheep on his back the shepherd returns home. But now the sheep fold is empty. All sheep had disappeared! Godly Play really has become a play. A strenuous play. The shepherd won't manage it on his own any longer. He is in the need of support. A girl is ready to guard the sheep by holding her hands protectively above the fold while the shepherd is seeking every single sheep, finding them step by step and carrying them back. Finally, all lost sheep are back home and safe. The shepherd is exuberantly happy. Everyone in the circle is happy as well. Now, we start to celebrate a great feast as we experienced: The Good Shepherd is living quite concrete, not just within a play. He is present in a real way testing and developing faith in Godly Play.

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Translation of: Schweiker, Wolfhard: Der Gute Hirte im Test: Godly Play im Religionsunterricht einer Sonderschul-Klasse. In: CRP 57/ 2004, 48-49; 24.03.2017