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Making the Bible Modern: How I Created a Retelling of the Good Samaritan

Laura Beth Warner

Ouachita Baptist University

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Why Religious Picture Books?

I decided to study different religions and how they teach their children religious values through literature because of my project in Dr. Pemberton's world religions class spring of my sophomore year (2018). In her class, we learned about the major religions around the world, and I was assigned to study Buddhism. We could choose any topic that falls under our religion, so I chose to study their children's literature. I ordered a Buddhist children's bedtime story book from Amazon and read through several of the stories in it. They were all geared toward teaching Buddhist children aspects of their religion—the Eightfold Path and the Four Noble Truths.

My introduction paragraph from my research paper shows exactly why I wanted to study children's literature in light of religious teaching.

Whether oral traditions or written traditions, literature is a key part of every religion and culture. Human beings operate on stories: to learn, to express themselves, to teach, to interact daily with those around them. Without the art of storytelling, civilization would not have developed as vibrantly as it has. Stories influence members of a religion and culture as nothing else can; this is why literature is such a big part of the development of adherents to a religion. Therefore, religious literature is often taught to children in stories. Understanding traditional Buddhist writings and societal characteristics leads to the realization that Contemporary American Buddhist families utilize storytelling and incorporate related activities to raise their children to understand the Buddhist way of life (Warner).

This paragraph from the same paper shows the techniques that made these stories successful in conveying the religious beliefs of Buddhism to an audience of children.

Whether oral traditions or written traditions, literature is a key part of every religion and culture. Human beings operate on stories: to learn, to express themselves, to teach, to interact daily with those around them. Without the art of storytelling, civilization would not have developed as vibrantly as it has. Stories influence members of a religion and culture as nothing else can; this is why literature is such a big part of the development of adherents to a religion. Therefore, religious literature is often taught to children in stories. Understanding traditional Buddhist writings and societal characteristics leads to the realization that Contemporary American Buddhist families utilize storytelling and incorporate related activities to raise their children to understand the Buddhist way of life (Warner).

Story Time

I spent every Monday from 4-5 p.m. studying children's books and religious curriculum with Dr. Amy Sonheim last fall (2020). We read books about Judaism, Hinduism, Native American religion, atheism, and Christianity. Some of the stories were longer than others, but they all had the goal of teaching children religious beliefs.

Reading these stories gave me a deeper appreciation for the genre of children's literature. Using pictures and words to teach their audience of young children difficult concepts, these authors knew what they were doing. With each book Dr. Sonheim and I discussed what seemed to work to communicate these beliefs well and what did not. We wrote down the good techniques—fewer words, pictures that did not just show exactly what the words said—and the things not to do—write full pages of single spaced text.

My ultimate goal was not just to study these children's books but use them to aid my creative process for my own retelling of a religious story.

What I Learned from Story Time

Student of Stories

In elementary school, one summer I participated in a weekly workshop called Young Writers. I vaguely remember learning the essentials for story writing; you must have a beginning, middle, and end, and you must start brainstorming with a “T chart.” That summer a seed was planted in my head. I thought I might want to be a writer someday. As I got older, I discovered that I liked reading stories better than writing them; it was not as much work, and I was less tempted to quit halfway through the story if I was not the one giving life to the characters. Over the years, I have continued to love reading and enjoy writing as a creative outlet, but my passion for stories has changed. I have learned to see the value that many kinds of stories hold. As I have gotten to work with children in a church setting, I have seen how good stories draw kids in, and how they remember a story more than a lecture. I have come to understand the value of storytelling as a teaching tool, and this semester, I got to be a student of the stories.

This semester, I studied children’s stories from Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Native American religion, Judaism, Islam, and atheism. I also explored the idea of the children’s Bible. Studying stories from different religions presented me with an opportunity to understand more than just religious and cultural preferences in storytelling. Books come with unique authors, illustrators, and publishers. Despite these varying origins, many of the techniques that make these stories successful in communicating religious values to readers are the same.

After this semester, I would argue that writing successful, gets-the-point-across picture books for children must be harder than writing a four-hundred-page novel. There are so many factors to consider that I never would have dreamed are so important for the success of a children’s book that seeks to do more than just entertain. Teaching religious values is important

to all of the writers I have studied, and though some seem to accomplish their goal with more success than others, there is consistency with several techniques across the board. The aspects of successful storytelling that stick out to me as the most critical are the ones we seemed to talk about each week—illustrations, communicability, and purpose.

The importance of cohesiveness between illustrations and words is the foundation of a successful children’s book. It seems that all other aspects that help make a story great build on this foundation. This is something I had never given much thought to. I assumed that the words were the content, and the pictures were what kept children entertained. However, the stories I studied this semester certainly showed me that without carefully chosen illustrations, words on a page seem lacking. Good illustrations help tell the story so that extra words do not clutter the page. The pictures are not supplemental, rather they hold just as much weight in the game as the words. With this balance comes aesthetic appeal of the words and pictures as well. Not only do successful books have fewer words per page, these words also blend well with the illustrations so that they are not difficult to read nor do they stand out drastically.



In *Me and Dog*, illustration and words work together to show what the author intends children to understand. The boy is physically the center of the universe and has the dog in his hand. This combination that emphasizes the three words on the page.

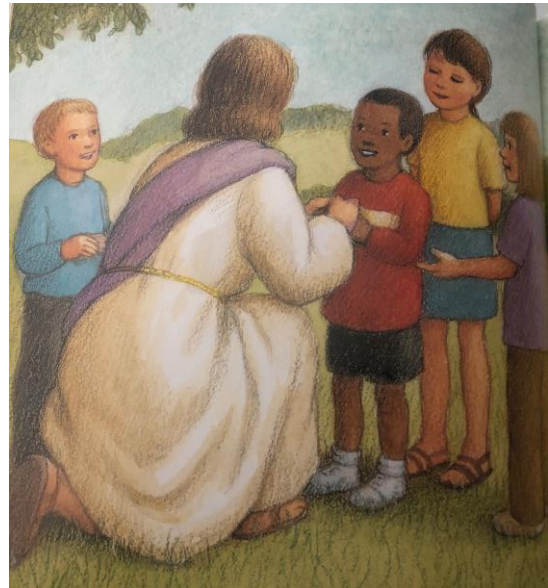
Many of the books I studied make use of rhyme to tell their stories. Instead of this style feeling childish or forced, it seems that it allows authors to carefully craft their words so that the story flows well and less words have to be used to communicate it. A good example of this style is Laura Sassi's *Goodnight, Ark*.

Illustrations are important for representation in storytelling—especially in Christian children's literature. The attempts by many books I studied this semester to diversify were inconsistent and unsuccessful. In the retelling of the parable of the lost sheep, *Puppy Love*, the characters are people of color, but at one point the little boy suddenly has a white hand. In *If Jesus Walked Beside Me* by Jill Roman Lord, there is one picture with a Black child in the story, but the rest of the illustrations show a Caucasian Jesus helping Caucasian children.

Then he invited everyone to his home to celebrate.



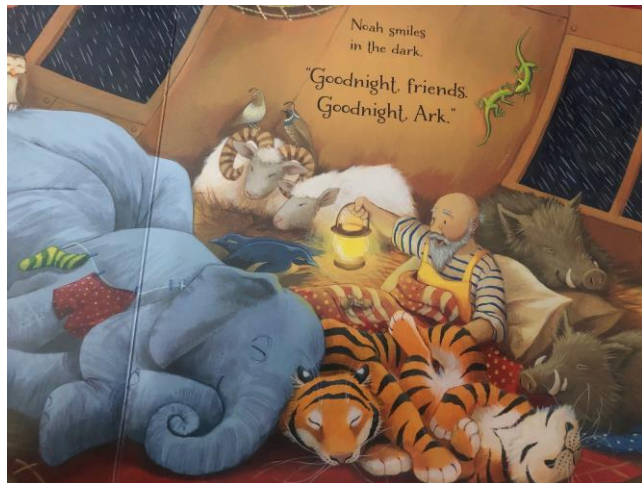
Who Counts? Is a great picture of true diversity throughout a story—ethnically and socially.



The one attempt at diversity in the illustrations of *If Jesus Walked Beside Me*.

The communicability of a story comes from the content of the story. The illustrations and words are what portray the content, but whether or not it is communicating what the author intends depends on the amount of information and tone with which the author presents it. We talked a lot about how children can comprehend and handle much more serious, scary, or strange information than adults give them credit for—especially if it is presented in story that they can connect with while also not being personally involved. In *Goodnight, Ark*, Sassi relies heavily on her illustrator, Jane Chapman, to communicate that God, through Noah, wants everyone, even the scary animals, to feel welcome and safe from storms. On the surface, the rhyming words and colorful illustrations make this story a relaxing and silly bedtime story, but with the intentional choices made throughout the story, Sassi’s book could easily spark questions that lead to deep conversations about God’s love and parents telling the real story of Noah’s ark.

The cozy, cuddly image of all these animals snuggled together with Noah combined with the text “Goodnight, friends,” conveys the feelings of safety Sassi wants children to experience in life, but also in the moments before they sleep.



Communicating well in stories is not difficult. Sometimes authors and teachers alike tend to mistake youth for ignorance. Overstating and overemphasizing the points of a religious story in order to “dumb it down” for children makes stories seem forced and cheesy. This is one of the biggest mistakes seen in Christian religious teaching. The Native American literature I studied is a good example of presenting material for children while assuming they can be helped to

understand it. The style of this work is more akin to textbooks than bedtime stories, but it is effective and entertaining still. Authors Caduto and Bruchac present stories with black and white illustrations followed by supplemental material parents and teachers can use to breakdown the story and encourage children to think critically on their own. The use of application questions and planned activities does not take away from the child's ability to understand from the story alone, rather, these tools enhance the child's ability to make connections with the material that are not forced from overstating the content.

While the purpose of each of these religious stories is to teach children the values of their religion, I believe each author has a specific goal for their story within the realm of the religion they hold to. Understanding this purpose helps not only the author and illustrator synthesize an entertaining, instructing, and engaging story, it also helps the adult reader know what their child can be expected to learn from the book. This concept of focusing on the purpose of the story can be as simple as finding one characteristic about each deity of the Hindu religion for children to being understanding (*My First Book of Hindu Gods and Goddesses*) or as complex as portraying both Judaism and Islam in the same story of two neighbors (*Yaffa and Fatima*). One is not better than the other, the stories just look differently to achieve their purpose.

Through all the books I studied this semester, I learned that storytelling is an art that transcends cultural, social, religious, and political status. By studying the techniques of authors and illustrators of differing backgrounds, I can confidently claim that the most successful stories are the ones where author and illustrator work together to synthesize a story from both words and pictures. If this happens, it is less likely for a story to be forced. The message is communicated clearly and effectively which allows the purpose of the story to be clear to the reader. Ultimately, a good story can only be built upon a solid foundation.

The Stories (Bibliography)

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Becoming an Author

For the final product of my research, I decided to create a picture book. After studying a variety of stories of many religious backgrounds, I realized that pictures are too important to leave out of material for kids unless you are teaching from a stage. I enjoyed reading these books more because of their illustrations. I was able to better understand the messages their authors wanted to communicate because of the pictures.

I chose to create a retelling of the Good Samaritan story Jesus tells the lawyer in Luke's gospel. This story is one I remember loving as a child. While it is full of theological truth from Jesus, it is also just entertaining. The idea of robbers, injury, a hero, and an implied happy ending is something all children get excited by. Loving and knowing your neighbor is also a timely lesson for children growing up in the middle of extreme racism struggles and a pandemic.

Goals for my Book

Ultimately, I want my book to interest kids and correctly communicate the command of Jesus to love our neighbors sacrificially. I hope kids will enjoy the story and remember what it was about after they are done reading it. I would love for this story to spark conversations with kids about what it means to be a neighbor and how they can be a neighbor to the people around them in daily life.

My Creative Process

My first step for my retelling of the Good Samaritan was to choose my audience. I wrote for who I know—middle-class kids at First Baptist Benton. I specifically decided to target first graders as my readers, and they are the ones I decided to use as my guinea pig audience/beta readers. I wanted to focus on the aspect of being a neighbor to everyone even when it is inconvenient or scary rather than heavily on the race issue of the parable. I think the otherness of the Samaritan is more than just his race, it is his religious and cultural differences too that made this parable so shocking to Jesus' audience. Because of the intense racial tension these kids are growing up with, it seemed like the heart of the story could be told by showing that the hero is different and unexpected in other ways.

I turned to the world of commentaries to make sure my story would be theologically sound. I learned more about the context of this parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus tells in Luke. The dangerous journey the man went on became the outside world to my characters. The people that were expected to be the heroes that helped the man but didn't because of the rules became my teacher's pet, type-A characters. The man that was hurt became my main character.

The hardest characters to translate were the lawyer asking Jesus about getting into heaven and Jesus himself. I wanted to include that part of the story because it is the whole reason Jesus tells this parable that we get the command "love your neighbor" from, but setting up the story this way proved challenging. I think I finally managed this by framing the story with the little girl hearing a bedtime story from her dad.

After doing research on this parable and coming up with characters, I created a storyboard of the plot. This was a very rough draft, but the gist of the story remained into

my final draft. Dr. Sonheim and I did a lot of brainstorming and working through problems in her office each Friday. Questions like where is the adult? and why can't these kids help? had to be carefully solved.

Sitting down to write the words and draw the pictures was a struggle. I had everything in my head but didn't know how to get it on paper in a way that let the pictures work with the words to add to the telling of the story without being redundant. With help from Google Images and Brooke Snyder, I got a first draft done. The pictures were rough, but they showed what they needed to.

The title was the very last piece of the puzzle to come together. I wanted something that would catch people's eye but also clearly communicate the content of the story. My first-grade friends helped me come up with some ideas, but eventually I decided that *The Unexpected Neighbor* fit best. This title hints at the surprise of who the Good Samaritan character is in my retelling and shows readers that the idea of neighbor is at the heart of this story. I also think it flows well. It sounds like a book I would have wanted my mom to read to me when I was in first grade.

Rough Sketch

The Good Samaritan
a retelling

Title: The Kind 2nd Grader ?
" " Little Girl
Neighbor?

Characters:

- Bible
- Lawyer
- Jesus
- man robbed
- Priest
- Levite
- Samaritan
- Innkeeper

→ maybe open w/ these? or close?

Retelling

- ? daughter
- Preacher? Sunday School teacher? parent?
- little boy "wronged" by fence
- little girl, preacher's granddaughter?
- little boy, perfect Attendance record
- little girl from church across street walking w/ family
- teacher / LG's parentz

Setting:

- Bible
- dangerous road (long)

Retelling

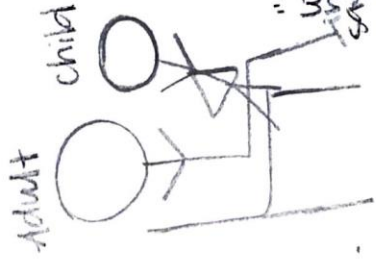
- Church playground
- not dangerous?
- okay?

Maps?

Story board

and not necessarily
 sold on this
 opening scene

Intro
 Mirrors
 Lawyer & Jesus

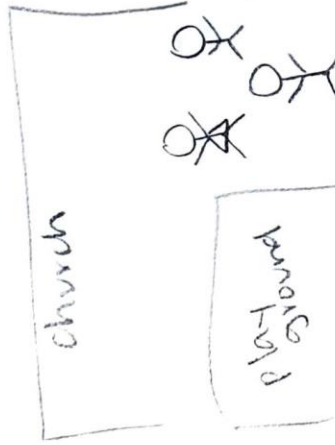


child
 One night — asked
 dad how to
 love a kid @
 School who was
 different from
 the
 "This sounds kind of
 like a Jesus anecdote
 in Bible. He might
 say something like this..."

The little boy knew he had
 to try to get the ball
 so they could keep playing
 the game. He saw
 a small gap in the fence
 & thought he could fit
 through it.



* Start Story
 retelling *

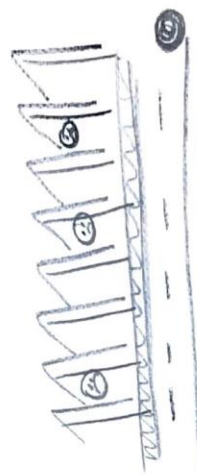


One day a little boy was playing
 kickball w/ his friends at church...

He crawled through gap,
 but his shirt got snagged
 on the broken metal.
 RIP! ← w/ words
 (own page.)



He kicked it so high it
 flew over fence, and
 everyone was scared
 to go get it bc teacher
 said stay on play ground.



little girl
 &
 little boy
 not
 helping



helps w/ ball

side by side
or eye down

No words



Little boy crosses
calls for help while
friends don't know what to do.



church

Little girl
& fam
walking out
of church
across street
see & come help.

shadows
(was looking
back)



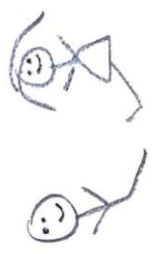
Little girl sits
by new friend
while parents go into
church for
teacher

End

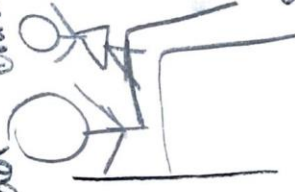
Teacher comes
out to take
care of little boy
& little girl &
fam leave.



Little boy
asks why she
wanted to help.
She says she didn't
like seeing him
sad & hurt even tho
she didn't know him.

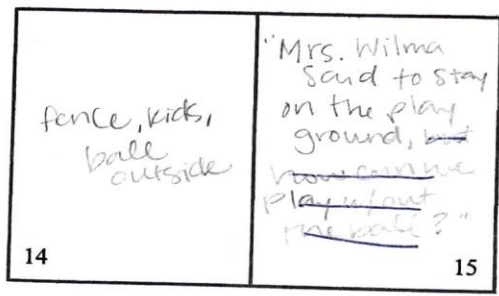
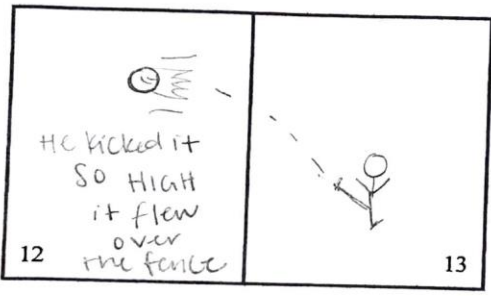
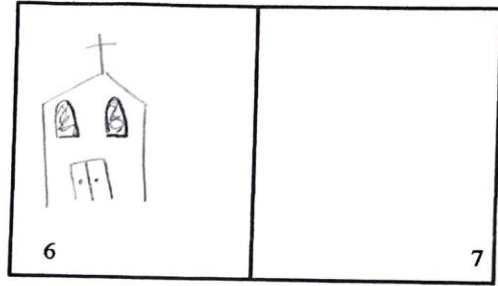
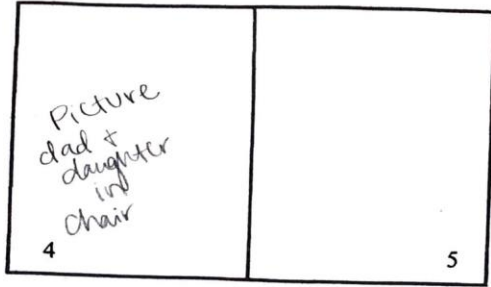


dad
child "So even
tho the LG
didn't know
US & they
went to diff
churches, she
still wanted to
help him.



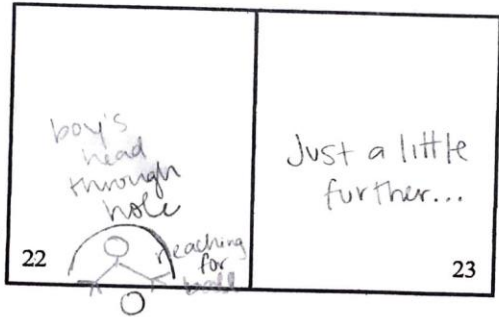
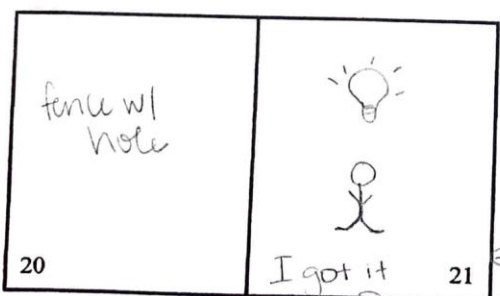
Do you
think she
knows how to
love her neighbor?
"or do you think she would love a
diff kid @ school"

Collage/stick people + simple drawings
 ball cut out + use each time? / digital images?



"Mrs. Wilma said to stay on the play ground, ~~but~~ how can we play out the gate?"

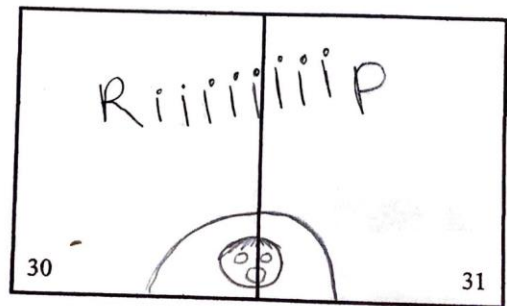
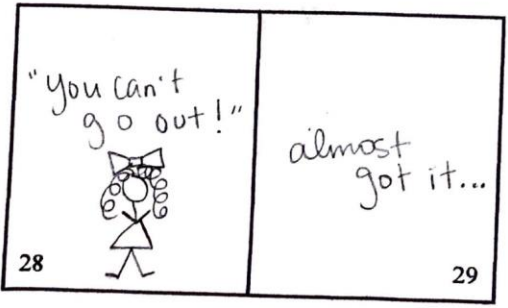
15



Just a little further...

23

I got it [or no words]



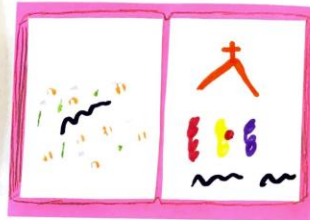
almost got it...

29

Surprised face

Looking More Like a Book

"...but daddy, even people I don't know? that don't live by us?"



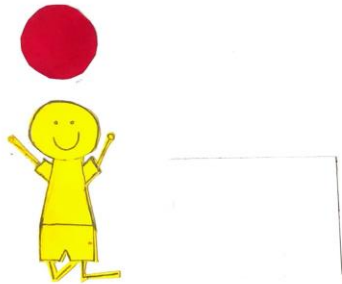
"Well, kiddo, let's see."

"Freeeeetime!"



Mrs. Wilma's class stampedes onto the playground.

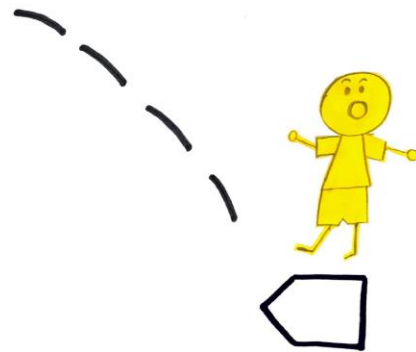
First Kicker!"



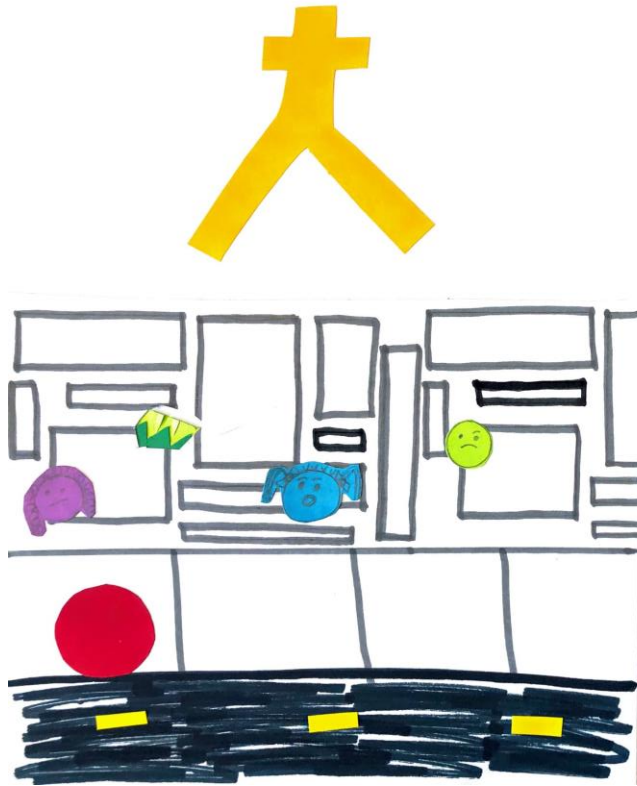
Sammy yells.



The class lines up.
Two teams form, but not
everyone wants to play.



The game is tied, and
Sammy's gotta score.
He lines up his kick and
let's it SOAR!



Things weren't looking good, but Sammy had a plan.



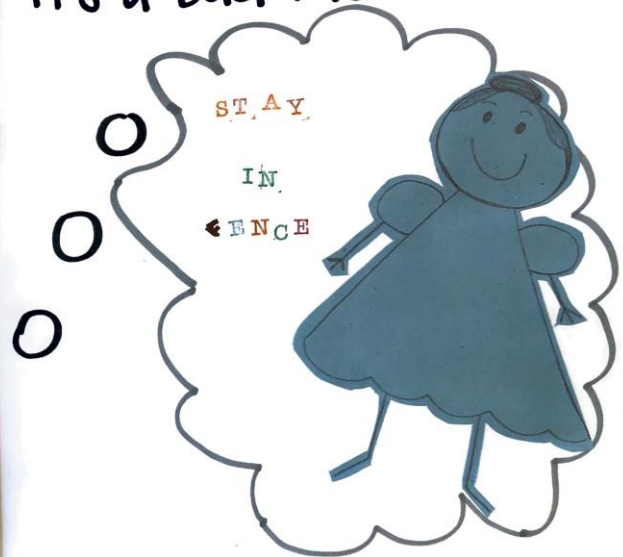
"I'll go get it," he said.

"No! You can't!"

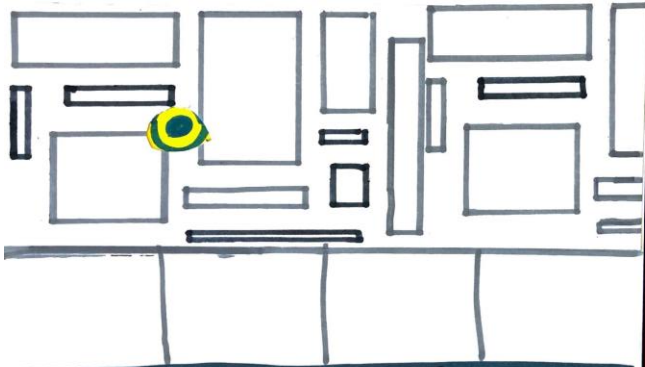


"It's out of the fence!"

Sammy walks to the hole. His friends say it's a bad idea.



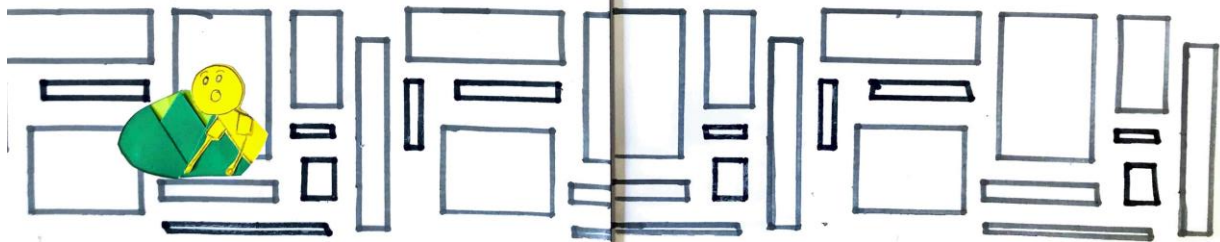
The hole is perfect,
it just might work!



Sammy's mom won't be
happy about the dirt.



Riiiiiiipppp



Sammy's stuck.
The ball's out
of reach.



"Are you stuck?"
She calls from across
the walk.

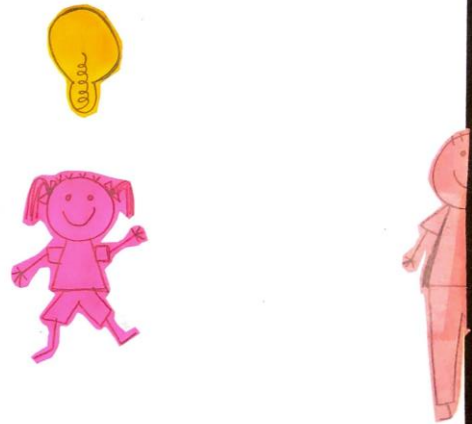


His friends can't help.
Someone hears Sammy
Yelp!

Yes.
Sammy's stuck.



She knows what to do.

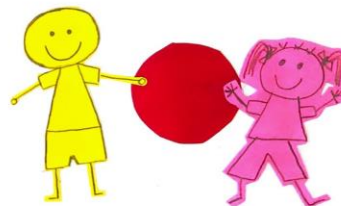


"They'll be right back, and
I'll stay with you."



Here comes Mrs. Wilma!
Sammy's free at last!

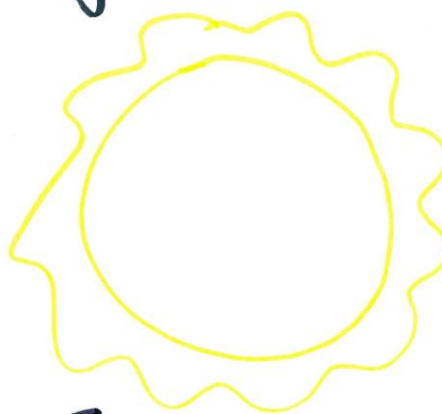
"My name is Sarah. We can be friends. Let's get your ball so we can play again!"



"So what do you think, Kiddo?"



Who is your neighbor?



↑
Plastic mirror

Firsties Feedback

On Sunday March 28, 2021, I got to read my first draft of my retelling of the Good Samaritan to one of the first grade Sunday School classes at FBC Benton. Elin, Etta, Brooklyn, Hollyn, Elizabeth, Logan, Landry, and Evan were my beta readers. We circled up, and I got out my loose pages of the first draft.

I opened by asking them to think of a title for me and tell me at the end of the story. They gave me three choices after we finished reading and talking about the story: Let's Be Kind, Who is Your Neighbor?, and Who is My Neighbor?

They seemed to understand the story. The drawing of the plastic mirror at the end confused them, but when I explained that it was going to be a real mirror that they could see themselves in they thought that was cool.

I got one comment asking why the words were one way and the pictures were sideways on the double spread where Sammy is stuck and we first see Sarah and her parents at their church across the street. I explained that this was supposed to show they were across the street from each other, and that answer satisfied the asker. My sister, Mallorie, solved this problem for me with her perspective illustration of this spread in my final draft.

Ultimately, I was pleased with the responses my first-grade friends gave to my story. They could tell me at the end that we are supposed to be neighbors to people we do not even know by being kind and helpful. They understood that even if the right thing to do is not the easiest thing, it is important. I think the suggested title Let's Be Kind showed that they grasped the command—love your neighbor—behind this story Jesus tells the lawyer in response to his question about eternal life.

Edits Applied...Big Changes to Second Story Draft

- Reworked the framing of the story with the little girl and the dad
- Made the change to digital illustrations of people and backgrounds
- Finalized word choices

The first two pages and last two pages of my second draft are included to show the progress on framing the story and the illustration changes.

Molly didn't want to go to sleep. She was worried her friend Emily would forget about her when she moved away.

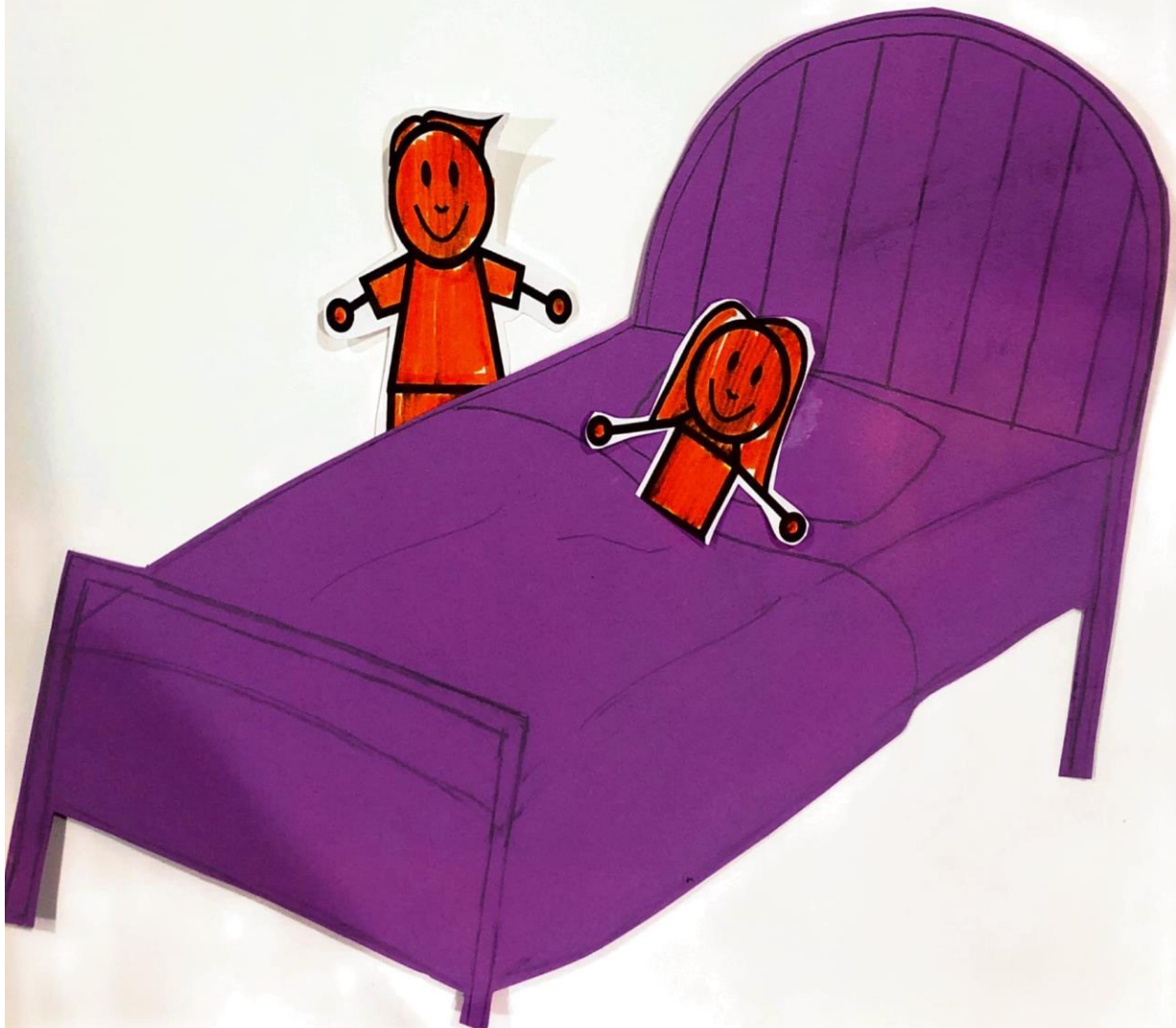
"Daddy," she said, "can Emily still be my neighbor in her new house?"



“That’s a really good question, princess,” her dad said,
“Jesus had a man ask him about his neighbor one
time. Let me tell you a story like Jesus told the man.”



“So, what do you think, Molls? Is Emily still your neighbor even if she doesn’t live by us?”



Who can be a neighbor?

