

Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory Inspires Lenten Series for Children

By Sabrina Evans

What does chocolate, a plethora of tasty candies, five children, and a strange man named Willy Wonka have to do with anything religious, let alone Lent? The children of St. John's Episcopal Church, Montgomery, Alabama, can tell you.

In 2005 Roald Dahl's book *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* was updated on the silver screen with Johnny Depp playing the role of Willy Wonka. However, to my mind the original 1971 movie, *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* with Gene Wilder in the title role, better captures the spirit of Dahl's book.

Several parents agreed that the new movie was much darker and not as enjoyable as the earlier movie. The 1971 version included the characters with whom we were familiar: the chocolate loving, constantly eating, and greedy Augustus Gloop; the whiney, demanding, envious Veruca Salt; the pushy, prideful Violet Beauregarde; the TV junkie Mike Teavee; and finally, our hard-working and honest Charlie Bucket. In some way or another, I've met people who remind me of these characters.

I wondered if these children from the old movie would resonate to the children of today. Could they relate to a 35-year-old film?

To begin, I watched the movie several times, following the actions of one child each time: What did they do? How did they respond? What did they say? How did they treat others? Character traits soon emerged that could be tied into the seven "deadly sins" of extravagance, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy and pride.

After establishing traits or sins, I looked for biblical connections and stories that would reinforce the redemption at the end of *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. Then I came across the parable of "The Forgiving Father" (also known as the "Prodigal Son") in *Luke 15*. The characteristics of each child could be understood in light of this story.

By focusing on one child for each session, we ended up with five sessions for our Lenten series. While we offered this program on Wednesday nights during Lent, it would work for other times as well.

All of the children ages 5 through the sixth grade received a "Golden Ticket" during the Wednesday night dinner, which they brought



with them to our meeting space. They signed the back of their ticket for a chance to win a "Grand Prize," given the last night of the series. The Grand Prize was a Willy Wonka lunchbox filled with candies of all kinds.

Using video clips at each session from the 1971 film *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (the 1995 *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* can also be used), we watched when the child first found or was given a golden ticket, where the child was introduced to Willy Wonka prior to entering the chocolate factory, and when the child left the factory. After discussing these three selections and the behavior of the child, the children described the various characteristics they recognized.

We then looked at the parable of the Forgiving Father using the materials from the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. The children were asked how the Prodigal Son was like each of the children in the movie.



"Green with Envy" boxes

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After the discussion times, the children worked on a specific craft to match the characteristics of the child from the film. For example, we made frog storage boxes with the saying “Green with Envy” the week we explored the character Veruca Salt.

Each craft incorporated the Oompa Loompa song from the film. By the end of the five weeks, we sang it together with loud, happy voices. As

part of the dismissal, each child received an appropriate Willy Wonka candy.

This program was a huge hit with children and adults alike, drawing the largest number of attendees we’ve ever had during Lent. By tying each night’s story to the parable of the Forgiving Father, we also reinforced the meaning of Lent.

The complete lesson plans for *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* are available through LeaderResources at <http://leaderresources.org>. Sabrina Evans is Director of Children’s Christian Formation at St. John’s.



FOR LENT

... and Is Adapted for Youth Group

By Jenifer Gamber

After Sabrina Evans posted her idea of using the film *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* as the basis for a Lenten children’s program on the listserve for the National Association of Episcopal Christian Educational Directors (NAECED), my mind started working.

Culture is one of the sources by which we come to know God, ourselves, and one another. Just as the Bible, the lives of saints and church history shape our faith, in the same way our community, experiences and culture inform our beliefs.

By actively delving into culture in faith discussions we can explore a source which is already engaging our teens: What in culture affirms our beliefs? What in culture challenges our beliefs? What do our tradition and community say? And finally, what are we called to do in the world as a result of what we believe?

Last year during Lent a group of youth ranging in age from 8 to 16 at the Cathedral Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, explored the world of Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory. We followed Sabrina’s model using the seven deadly sins and the story of the forgiving father, but added the seven “heavenly virtues” of purity, temperance, charity, diligence, patience, kindness and humility.

Each youth was given a blank journal and a Wonka Bar, which contained a golden ticket. The journal was for personal reflections about sin, virtue and forgiveness; the chocolate bar was to enjoy.

The first week we listed the seven deadly sins alongside the seven virtues and talked about what the words meant. We then listed each of the sins with its opposing virtue on opposite pages in our journal.

As we watched the video clips and discussed the characteristics of each child, we identified his or her sin and filled up the corresponding page of the journal with our thoughts about that character’s image, both inside and out.

One of the insights from the group was that each character got their “just desserts”—Mike Teavee, the sloth, became insignificant; Violet, the prideful, became full of herself as a giant blueberry; Augustus, the glutton, was baked into chocolate brownies; and Veruca, spoiled rotten with greed, ended up as garbage.

On the page headed by a virtue the youth wrote actions and ways of being that reflect that virtue. And at the end of each session we chose a verse from the wisdom literature in the Bible to inspire us for acting with virtue for the coming week.

During the last session we read the story of the Forgiving Father in Luke 15. We agreed with a wise fifth grader that no matter how much God yearns for our return, we have to want to return.