

The best judges of my theology are the littlest ones

The questions that plunge me into a cloud of unknowing most often come from my Sunday school students.

by [Isaac S. Villegas](#) in the [June 17, 2020](#) issue



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“What is a judgment?” a three-year-old asked me after our early morning Bible study. When we cancelled in-person worship indefinitely, due to the pandemic, I began to host these online devotional sessions for every weekday. This particular child joins his parents from their kitchen table. He eats spoonfuls of granola as he watches the laptop and listens to our conversation.

That morning we had been reading a passage from the prophet Joel in which God promises to avenge the violence against the people of Judah. “Let the nations rouse themselves and come up to the valley of Jehoshaphat,” God declares, “for there I will sit to judge all the neighboring nations.” As we shared our insights and questions, our wonderings and prayers, I could see the child’s eyes shift from face to face on his parents’ screen.

At the end of our half hour together, he always asks a parent to unmute the computer so he can say bye to all of us. But this time, after he sipped the last of the milk from his bowl, he pointed at my face and told his parents he had a question for me. “Isaac, what is a judgment?”

I took a breath and offered careful words, with as much clarity and concision as I could muster in those early morning hours. In a flash I was transported to a divinity school classroom, years ago, where Stanley Hauerwas called upon me to explain the meaning of phronesis in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*—although Hauerwas had nothing on this child’s intensity and inquisitiveness.

I’ve taught Sunday school for the kids at church for a decade, and I’m still nervous every time I do. That scene from the Gospels flashes into my head as we circle together on the carpet and I lay out the Popsicle sticks and glue and glitter for our craft—the scene in Capernaum when Jesus welcomes the children and then points his finger at the disciples. “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones,” Jesus warns the adults, “it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depths of the sea.”

Jesus cherishes the faith of children. I don’t want to lead their theology astray. I don’t want to stunt their curiosity about the world and their wonder about the mysteries of God. When it comes to saying things at church, “all of us make many mistakes,” the book of James acknowledges. However, “we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.”

God’s judgment worries me, like it did the three-year-old who asked me for an explanation. But mostly I experience my Sunday school class as plopping myself in what an anonymous 14th-century mystic called “the cloud of unknowing.” Not because of our shared ignorance, but because the kids’ insights bewilder the systems of thought lodged in my mind. With their questions, our conversations meander to truths that leave me with nothing to add, nothing to say—only to find

myself in a whimsical cacophony of sharing, each disruption an invitation to imagine God anew. Their words lead, a discourse of crafting and playing and wondering that leaves me stumbling over my own. "For I dare not speak with my blabbing fleshy tongue of the work that belongs to God," wrote the medieval mystic. Instead, our Sunday school classroom becomes a site for contemplating the wildness of God's mysteries.

Once, after I read to the seven-year-olds in my class the story about Moses and the burning bush, I lit a candle and asked them to listen to the flame. They squinted their eyes and tilted their ears toward the burning wick. I asked them what they thought God's voice sounded like to Moses. "God's voice crackled!" one child said. "God's words made a hissing noise, like when I whisper," said another. "I think God sounded like me," shouted a student, which provoked a shouting match as each kid claimed God's tone as an echo of their own.

I thought I should be a responsible teacher and get control of the class, but I couldn't help but laugh at my failure. (I had hoped to be training up Barthians, not these Feuerbachians.) Then a child who had sat in silence during the ruckus spoke up. "No," she announced. We all turned our attention to her. "God sounds like all of our voices, because we learn about God from each other." I glanced around the room. We all seemed to be in agreement, so I dismissed the class.

I'm not a contemplative. I don't meditate. But with these kids in Sunday school, as I grasp at the words of our faith that don't seem to work for them, I learn to listen to the Spirit who has gathered us to learn God's mysteries anew, together. "We need a new language in order to plunge into the cloud of unknowing," Dorothee Sölle commented on the medieval mystic's book. The kids in my class plunge my knowledge into that cloud as I fumble my way into a new language for our faith. For now, as I await God's final verdict on my words and actions, I'll listen for the judgment of the children at church. I'll trust their pronouncements about whether my theology is good news.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "The littlest judges."