

Building Faith Brick by Brick II

An Imaginative Way to Explore the Parables
with God's People

Emily Slichter Given



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“For generations, we have heard the adage that those who ‘pray together, stay together.’ But a tidal wave of compelling and catalytic research in the last decade on gaming, design thinking, and digital storytelling has proven that communities that stay together, play together. Congregations are finally realizing that God has given an imagination, as well as a mind, to every person. And that imagination must be named and nurtured so that both liturgy and life are an experience of ‘the seen and the unseen.’ Emily Given has written an essential text to help anyone who wants to engage divine truths through holy play for all generations. The word *lego* is, in fact, the Danish word for ‘play well.’ Read this book and let Emily Given show you how playing well can teach all ages to pray well too.”

—**Patricia M. Lyons,**

Missioner for Evangelism and Community Engagement, Episcopal Diocese of Washington and author of *Teaching Faith with Harry Potter*

“Parables are for everyone, as are LEGOs®. Using LEGOs® to respond to Jesus’ parables will profoundly deepen and expand the faith of students *and* leaders. All ages are blessed when they are involved in using LEGO® bricks to build and to explore the kingdom of God. Emily’s versatile new book is like going back for a second helping of dessert—you want more of a wonderfully good thing!”

—**Gail M. Jackins, M.Ed.,**

Faith Formation Coordinator, St. Cuthbert Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas

“No one in the Episcopal Church messages as well about our faith and the meaning of it as Emily Given. Having devoted much of her career to the spiritual formation of children, she has learned to shape her words with great care and how to convey the gospel in the most inclusive, welcoming manner that I have ever encountered. I have been privileged to serve in ministry with her and listen to her make many insightful comments about the Sunday lectionary in our staff Bible studies, as well as to hear her preach. Anything that she says, does, or writes is a gift to the wider faith community. Emily Given makes the Bible come alive.”

—**Marek Zabriskie,**

Rector of Christ Church, Greenwich, Connecticut
and author of *The Bible Challenge*

“*Building Faith Brick by Brick II* is a wonderfully creative resource you can use to literally create an encounter with God! Emily Given’s out-of-the-box approach to breaking open the Word not only is creative and easy to follow, but it has also revitalized our faith-formation sessions. Our annual tradition of ‘Building the City of God’ has become an event the entire parish looks forward to. Attendance during these sessions is better than at any other time of the year. The children enthusiastically dig deep into the scripture stories to glean a better understanding of the parable, key characters, geographic location, and physical terrain. Working as a team, they create a three-dimensional representation of the story and are able to articulate the passage. Our entire community then gathers to celebrate the creations. Not only are the children becoming intentional disciples by proclaiming the Word of God, they are also learning how to work as a team to build their Bible story brick by brick.”

—**Vici Armsby,**

Pastoral Associate for Faith Formation, The Catholic Community of Our Lady of Victory and Our Lady of the Snow Mission, Troy, New York

“Emily Given’s ‘Brick by Brick’ method is perfect for presenting the parables of Jesus to children. While other curricula may opt to explain a parable and distill a ‘moral of the story’ for children, this approach allows children to make their own meaning, in their own time. The Building Questions help us (children and adults alike) to look at each parable from different angles, uncovering for ourselves the deep truth that lies inside for each of us. While preserving mystery and wonder, this curriculum helps children build their own religious language, with which to shape their thoughts and feelings about God and about their place in the big story of God’s people. When this is our approach to Christian education—sharing our stories, nurturing the wondering process, and providing opportunities for child-directed creative response—we walk alongside our children in their journey of faith without getting in the way, and we allow the spirit to move where it will.”

—**Catherine Montgomery,**

Director of Children’s Formation and Family Ministries,
Christ Episcopal Church, Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida

“Poets use words. A chef uses food. Composers use music. Artists use paint. There are countless ways we tell the stories of our lives . . . of our faith. Emily Given is a creative genius in offering children and children-at-heart a way to enter into, while becoming a part of, the parables of Jesus using LEGO® bricks. *Building Faith Brick by Brick* is a visual and sensory experience—one that challenges and inspires the participant to think out of the box. It’s also great fun! Ideal for churches and other religious institutions, both *Brick by Brick* books are also wonderful resources for experiencing faith in the home.”

—**Roger Hutchison,**

Director of Christian Formation and Parish Life, Palmer Memorial
Episcopal Church, in Houston, Texas, and author of *Jesus: God Among Us*

“Imaginative, formative, and practical! *Building Faith Brick by Brick* works because it teaches the Bible story by story in an interactive way that children love and understand. The lessons are detailed and easy for teachers to prepare. The building questions make it very comfortable to engage children with the lesson, especially for new teachers. This user-friendly book checks all the boxes for children’s formation. A Christian formation director’s dream!”

—**Lyn Merchant,**

Director of Children and Youth Ministries,
Grace Episcopal Church, Anderson, South Carolina

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* The following parables are found in the first volume of *Building Faith Brick by Brick: An Imaginative Way to Explore the Bible with Children* (2014): The Parable of the Good Samaritan; The Parable of the Lost Sheep; and The Parable of the Prodigal Son.

The *Building Faith Brick by Brick Method* (Revised)

General Guidelines

Age Range

- Most commonly used with children kindergarten through fifth grade.
- Often used for intergenerational gatherings.
- Suited for anyone over the age of four.

Group Size

- Small groups can effectively range from three to twenty people.
- Adult-to-child ratio should be at least one adult to eight children for small groups.
- Intergenerational gatherings can be of any size.
- For children under age five, a ratio of one adult to three children is suggested. (Be careful with the size of the building bricks.)



St. John's Episcopal Church, Georgetown, Washington, D.C.

Potential Settings

- Sunday school curriculum (30 minutes or more)
- alternative to boring lesson options found in other curricula (15 minutes or more)
- afterschool program (1 hour or more)
- weekday club (1 hour or more)
- family or inter-generational event (1 hour or more)
- youth group retro activity (20 minutes or more)
- VBS curriculum or supplement (1 hour or more)
- childcare room option (open ended)
- home and family devotional (open ended)
- adult learning communities (40 minutes or more)

Preparation

Story Selection

- The best stories tend to include action, adventure, drama, wonder, mystery, or suspense.
- Provide a mix of well-known and more obscure stories to provide intrigue as well as to build biblical literacy.
- Explore only one story each session.
- Remember to think about the context of the story.
- Select an age-appropriate translation of the Bible—picture or chapter/verse.
- Use the same Bible for the entire span of sessions. This helps to reinforce that all of the stories are found in scripture.

Preparing the Space and Setting the Tone

- Pray over the space.
- Clear the room to maximize floor space. LEGO®ing is best done on the floor or ample tabletop surfaces.
- Place a Christ candle in the room. (It can be a good quality battery-powered candle if you are concerned about fire or safety.)
- Create a place for prayer and check in—akin to “circle time.”
- Place the Bible and samples of artwork in the circle where the leader will sit.
- Establish a display and discussion space. A dedicated table or counter works best.
- Set up a snack area. Eating “family style” promotes conversation.
- Prepare participant supplies. See page 25 for more details.



St. Thomas' Episcopal Church, Whitemarsh, Ft. Washington, Pennsylvania

General Lesson Structure

Welcome to the Group

- Welcome each person into the room by a volunteer or leader.
- Name tags are key. The use of names is so important. It is also a helpful tool for people to begin to learn the names of one another.
- Give a bowl or bucket, building mat, and a few minifigures to each participant.
- Invite each person to fill their bowl or bucket with LEGOs® and encourage them to create freely while others arrive.
- Give a two-minute notice before the focused group time begins.

Note: To avoid mix-ups with bowls, use a dry erase marker to label each bowl or bucket with names. After trying a number of different styles and shapes, the large, square popcorn buckets found at the dollar store seem to work the best.

Lay the Foundation

- Background information has been provided for both the leader and the group. Details include placement in the biblical narrative and intended audience.

Did You Know?

- Additional background information is included in this section to spark interest and to provide a wider base of knowledge and context before the story is shared. Some of the facts included may need to be tailored to the particular age group.

Pray

- Light the Christ candle and pocket the matches.
- Invite each person voluntarily into some form of prayer:
 - Write or draw prayers on brightly colored paper rectangles to build a brick prayer wall session by session.
 - Etch-a-Sketches®.
 - White boards.
 - Toss a LEGO® brick into a central bucket for each prayer offered during the circle gathering. These prayers can be guided or unprompted.
 - Magnetic letters on metal sheeting or baking trays.
 - Popcorn prayers: children pop up to offer a short prayer when so moved.
 - Post-It® note prayers: colorful notes can be stuck to the wall to build an ongoing prayer corner.
 - Tying ribbons onto a net.
 - Lighting candles or switching on battery-powered votives for each prayer.
 - Group texts for teens or adults.

Check In: Give the group an opportunity to tell something new about their lives since the last session. Possible prompts are “Tell me something from your day.” or “Tell me something that I would never know unless you told me.”

Share the Story

- Introduce the story:
 - Where can it be found in the Bible?
 - What type of writing?
 - Who was the initial audience?
- Share the story by reading or retelling it.
- Show different images of the story to help spark imagination (art books, original pieces, or online image sites).

Respond to the Story

Building Questions

- Allow time for “building” questions, comments, and insights. A list of questions is provided for each lesson. This can often be the most sacred part of the gathering. Try not to rush through the reflections. The interior life of the group will often emerge in the most astounding ways. This is where the bulk of the theological reflection can be heard and witnessed.
- The list is intentionally longer than needed for one session so that the lessons can be repeated with the same group over time. This also allows for the leader to pick and choose which questions fit best within the context or age level.
- Questions appropriate for all lessons:
 - I wonder what it would be like to hear Jesus tell stories?
 - I wonder why Jesus told so many stories?
 - I wonder who tells stories to you?
 - I wonder what stories you have inside of you?
 - I wonder what Jesus is saying to us now?
 - I wonder if you see yourself in this story?
 - I wonder what the story tells us about God?
 - I wonder what this story tells us about life?
 - I wonder if you have ever been told a story that you didn’t understand?
 - I wonder if you have ever witnessed the Kingdom of Heaven?

Suggested Blueprints

- *Building Faith Brick by Brick* is intended to be an open-ended theological reflection space using LEGO® bricks. The need to specifically script a response should be avoided. However, if a person is having a difficult time focusing in on a response to the story, a few suggested idea starters have been included, called “Blueprints.” The suggestions should only be introduced as needed. Reading them to the whole group could hinder the creative process, so keep them for “as needed” moments.
- Allow the Blueprint suggestions to be simple words or concepts to spark ideas within the imagination of the individual.
- Set the expectation that something from the story must be constructed before any other creations can be made.
- Be available to answer questions, review the story, or help “stuck” participants.

Share Responses to the Story

- As people complete their creations, provide a place for temporary display.
- Listen to the stories the participants want to share about their work. This can be one-on-one, or as a whole group, or both ways.
- Optional: Take a photo of each person with their creation or the creation alone.

Further Reflection across all Ages

The first volume of the book has had a life beyond its original intention. When it came to my attention that adult learning groups were using the building questions to assist their scripture studies, I decided

to add an additional reflection section that offers a deeper place for personal reflection that may (or may not) be a different conversation than those in the reflections of younger believers.

Share a Snack *(optional, yet highly recommended)*

- Begin or end with a story-related snack, if possible.
- Pray over the food and group gathered. This prayer can be led by a person of any age. It can be a wonderful place to help everyone exercise the art of praying aloud in groups.

Continue the Story

- Encourage each person to show their work to another person and share something from the story or creative process.
- Allow families to explore the story at home by e-mailing, online photo sharing, texting, eblasts, or making a take-home sheet with the Bible verse.
- If possible, keep creations on display during the week in a location seen by other parts of the faith community.



St. Cuthbert's Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas

The Parables of Cloth and Wineskins

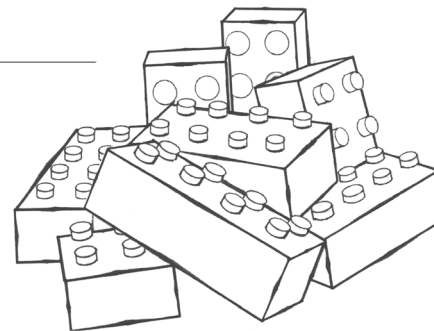
Matthew 9:14–17; Mark 2:18–22; Luke 5:33–39

Welcome to the Group

Lay the Foundation

- Where is the story found in the Bible? **New Testament**
- What is its place in the biblical narrative? **Jesus’s teachings**
- Who was Jesus teaching? **Levi, Pharisees, tax collectors, and unnamed others**

Find the full description of Lay the Foundation on page 22.



Did You Know?

- ✓ Jesus’s cousin, John the Baptist, also had disciples (followers).
- ✓ This is one of the first times the foretelling of Jesus’s death is introduced into his teachings.
- ✓ “Fasting” means to intentionally go without something for a period of time as a form of prayer and devotion. Commonly it is understood to be food, but it can be anything of a sacrificial nature that points one toward prayer and reflection.
- ✓ Wineskins were made from the skin of sheep or goats.
- ✓ Being a tax collector in the ancient world had a negative association since they were known for being dishonest and unfair in their assessment and collection of taxes.
- ✓ Matthew was a tax collector. He may or may not be the same person named Levi.
- ✓ Pharisees were a group of people who kept close to the tradition and laws of Judaism.

Remember . . .

- A parable is a simple story that seeks to explain a more complex idea.
- Jesus used common images of the time to make the stories understandable.
- The root word “parable” comes from the Greek concept “to compare or lay alongside of each other.”

Pray

God of new beginnings, fill us with your goodness. Open our minds to experience the many new ways you call us closer and prepare our hearts to follow you. Amen.

Share the Story

Suggestions for storytelling are detailed on page 23.

Respond to the Story

Invite each member of the group to use bricks and minifigures to respond to the story. This can be done individually or in small groups. Suggestions for how to support this form of theological reflection can be found on pages 23–24.

Building Questions

- I wonder if you have ever tried to repair or reuse something?
- I wonder if you have ever fasted? From food? From things? From activities?
- I wonder if you have ever made a really big change in your life?
- I wonder if you have ever tried to mix things that shouldn't be mixed?
- I wonder if it is possible for old things and new things to blend together?
- I wonder if something can become whole again?
- I wonder what Jesus was trying to tell the Pharisees and tax collectors?

Questions appropriate for all lessons see page 23.

Suggested Blueprints *(if needed)*

- Levi's house
- Galilean village
- wineskins
- Jesus
- cloth
- God
- Pharisees
- Holy Spirit
- tax collectors

Share Responses to the Story

Encourage each group member to share the creations they have made in response to the story. More details about sharing can be found on page 24.

Further Reflection across All Ages

The message of Jesus is one of transformation. His coming changed everything. Maybe the wineskins and cloth call us to consider that the blending of old and new can rarely happen by putting a patch on an existing garment or seal on the seam of a drinking vessel. Craftspeople of all kinds understand that it is hard to mix materials and create a cohesive product. Levi,

a tax collector, was called to follow Jesus right before the parables of the cloth and wineskins. I wonder, what it was like to know that his whole life was about to change and that little of the old would translate into the new ways of living? He could not patch or mend what he knew. What do we need to leave behind to follow Jesus in a deeper way? When have we noticed the "seams are pulling" on our lives because we are practicing the act of patching instead of replacing?

It is possible that we should think about this call to change in larger terms than just personal transformation. How might the systems we are part of (or benefit from) a true sense of transformation? How might we be called to be a voice for relational and systemic transformation? What might we be called to do to create something new in our homes, neighborhoods, country, and world?

Share a Snack

- Serve banquet foods true to the period (roasted meats, chickpeas, grape juice, grapes, figs, pita).
- A budget-friendly alternative to the banquet foods listed above includes fig bars, crackers, fruit, and sliced deli meats.

Continue the Story

One way to deepen the learning experience and create a link between the group and formation in the home is to have builders show their creations to others in the group. For additional study and conversation at home, consider different ways to share the scripture passages as well as some of the Building Questions. Possible methods of communication include group texts, social media posts, eblasts, online photo sharing, and printed take-home sheets.