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While interviewing children for their first Reconciliation, I asked Tommy what "penance" was. He answered without hesitation: "It's sort of like a time-out."

A young mother told me that when her little daughter was throwing her food rather than eating it, she put her in the time-out space. Lucia increased her crying, of course. Her 7-year-old brother spoke on her behalf to his mother: "Couldn't you just give her another chance?" What a wonderful image of the God who loves us so much that a second chance comes easily.

Perhaps this child's experience is what Lent is like for us. It's a time-out. It provides the space and time for us to stop and think about our behavior, all the while knowing we can be forgiven. We all need time-out to reflect on what is happening in our lives: how we are affecting others; how we are growing in our faith; how our family is surviving with such hectic schedules; how we are sharing the goods we have — though meager — with others; what we are doing to bring peace to the world; how we spend our Sundays; how well we strive to be people with integrity.

During Lent, we might read children's books and watch children's movies that reflect the themes of simplicity, honesty, love, sharing and caring. Children have the capacity to see humor and foolishness while adults often tend to take things too seriously. Children are much closer to the original blessing of their birth, closer to the God who shared in their life from the beginning. As adults, we demand proof for the existence of God, we are anxious about the surety of "intelligent design," we are troubled about the church in the midst of scandals. Meanwhile, children go merrily on their way following their parents and basically answering every religion question with the same answers: "Jesus loves me, and God made me." Those truths seem quite sufficient for them.

Children take us by the hand. Children look at us in wonder. Lent, which carries with it the gruesome reality of the death of Jesus, is seen through the eyes of children as "I feel sorry for poor Jesus," rather than being a time of concern over whether we are being good enough. Often, for adults, Lent is about "what I have done." Children see that Lent is not about them. Children draw pictures that reveal what they know and believe about Jesus. My favorite picture was in a second-grade classroom. It was of Jesus praying in the garden. There was Jesus kneeling amid the carrots and the onions and the corn. With signs labeling each row! For the child, Jesus is simple. Jesus is like us in all things but sin. It is easy for a child to relate to such a Jesus.

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Children are actually fascinated by the atrocities of the Passion narrative even when we try to couch the language in love. They cannot believe this would really happen to such a good person. A young boy said he knew how Jesus died: "It was the crown of thorns that finally got him!" We do not have to go into the details about the death of Jesus, but perhaps it is this amazing story, simply told, that allows children to recognize that Jesus stood for good and he suffered. When we stand for what is good, we, too, may have to suffer — not death but indignation. Perhaps we will be told we are not patriotic because we stand for peace; perhaps we will be called a sissy because we are not a bully; perhaps we will be called a nerd because we would rather study than waste our precious time. These are ways that even children can suffer. And as adults, we need to be there to hold them up, to support them through these small death and resurrection experiences. Children are involved through the days of Lent by ashes, stories, crosses, "sacrifices," reading from the Bible and doing good for others. They, too, get ready to celebrate the great Easter Vigil when the "happy fault" is proclaimed. Children, who are too often reminded of their own "faults," can learn about the happy fault that brought Jesus to be among us so we could follow him, hold his hand, play in the sand around him, jump on his lap, share our food with him when asked and get in his way.

Especially during Lent, God embraces all people. God determines who is worthy to be at the table. God will judge who should live or die. It is during Lent, during this time-out, that we have time to stop, to look and to listen to our conscience, to our heart, to be touched by this God. Lent invites all, even children, to take time-out to change behavior, evaluate attitudes and study about this Jesus who is more than we can comprehend.

Editor's note: *This reflection was originally published in the March 2006 issue of [Celebration](#). Sign up to receive [daily Lenten reflections](#).*

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