

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Dear Parents of 4th, 5th, Graders,

This year your child's Sunday morning class will study *Jesus and His Kingdom of Equals*, which draws on the four gospels of the *New Testament*, and is supported by other ancient texts such as the Gospel of Thomas. The course is informed not only by the gospels themselves but by historical, cultural and linguistic knowledge of the historical period in which Jesus lived.

The guiding premises of this course include:

- The study of Jesus of Nazareth as he lived and walked on this earth is an important component of a religious life today.
- The ideas of equality and radical love as taught in the Jesus stories are still an ideal and worthy spiritual path.
- As basic familiarity with major people and events of the Bible is an important part of a religious education, we wish to provide our young people with biblical literacy.
- All knowledge we can gather from any reasonable source is appropriate for use in understanding Jesus and his times.

These lessons attempt to deal with the life of the person Jesus of Nazareth, as best we can perceive him, and not with aspects of Christian belief surrounding the Christ of faith. In other words, we will be discussing the earthly Jesus rather than the heavenly Jesus.

Recently a great deal of scholarly work has been done by linguists, theologians, and archeologists regarding the biblical periods and the formation of the gospel texts. Their work, newly informed by discoveries of ancient and sometimes alternative scriptures such as the Nag Hammadi documents, has enhanced what we now know about the teachings of Jesus and about his early followers as presented in the traditional scriptures.

Stories covered in this course were selected on the basis of two criteria:

- *The strength of their life message.* Lessons deal with central messages of Jesus' teachings and themes relating to basic ethical principles, such as tolerance, forgiveness, and reverence for life.
- *Their general fame.* Stories which our students might encounter in general literature, the language, and the culture at large, including the birth and Easter stories.

Why focus on Jesus the person? As the source of inspiration for Christian faith, the things Jesus said and did are a model worthy of concentrated study. From his struggle to live an authentic and humane life we can learn ways of approaching our own lives. He brought new ideas to rigid religious forms, took the world as the stage for personal social responsibility, and maintained that individuals together could create a just society on earth (the kingdom of God already within the human heart). He was a reformer, challenging the authority of the leaders and rules of his time.

During the year we'll make scrolls, codexes, and "ancient" clay lamps, act in skits, role-play situations involving ethical decisions, discuss how we can help resolve conflicts, and consider issues like nonviolence, helping society's weaker members, and the meaning of friendship. At the end of the year, we'll invite you to a Dinner in Ancient Palestine. Meanwhile, your child's participation in this class will be greatly enriched by your interest in what we're doing; ask her or him questions after class, and volunteer to assist us in the classroom or with the service outreach projects our class will plan.

We are asking students to bring a small item to place on our closing ritual table, something they consider special or which represents something of meaning to them. These items will be kept in the classroom for the year and returned when the course has finished.

Enclosed is a copy of the closing words we will be using each week as part of our closing ritual.

Please feel free to call us with any questions or ideas.

Your child's teachers,