A young mother wrote to Sofia Cavalletti about her daughter’s response to a parable proclaimed in the Atrium. In the weeks following the proclamation, the mother noticed that her daughter continued to use phrases and vocabulary from the parable in daily conversations. Sofia’s response came, “When children come in touch with some element of the Christian message it seems that they were waiting just for that.”

What are the scripture passages that are so rich and speak so deeply to our children? The founding catechists of CGS, Sofia Cavaletti and Gianna Gobbi, carefully observed children’s responses to specific scripture passages paying close attention to which ones elicited a response of joy. Over time they were able to discern scriptural images that were particularly helpful for our children. It may come as no surprise that the Parable of the Good Shepherd was one of those passages. Very young children delight in contemplating the Good Shepherd and His relationship with His sheep. While children older than 6 continue to enjoy the Good Shepherd parable, another scripture text emerged as one that was particularly rich for children between the ages of 6 to 12, the image of Christ as the true vine, found in the 15th chapter of the Gospel of John. The joy and depth of reflection that flowed from children after encountering this scripture, has led to using it as a central image in preparing children for the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist.

The following paragraphs will highlight some of the fruits of children’s reflection on this parable. Before proceeding you may wish to read the Parable yourself. John 15:1-11. (Note that vs. 6 is often omitted when first introducing this parable to children.)

In the parable of the True Vine, Jesus tells us something about who he is (the true vine), who his Father is (the vine grower), and also something about who we are (the branches). In addition to speaking about the identity of Jesus, his Father and us it also helps us to know how these relate to each other.

This could be called a parable about relationship. There is a sense of unity expressed in the image of the true vine. When examining a vine more closely we can recognize how integral the branches are to the vine and how the vine is made up of many branches that share the same sap.

The parable continually invites us to remain, ten times in ten verses in fact. Being told to remain implies that we are already there, we are already a branch on the vine. In addition it tells us how to be on the vine.
The result of our remaining is that we will bear fruit.

“Once when meditating on this parable with the children, one child observed the ratio between these is two to one: ‘to remain’ occurs ten times and ‘to bear fruit’ occurs five times.” (WTN, 91) Sofia comments on this, “The verb remain is a verb of being and indicates a state of rest. It is used twice as many times as the verb bear fruit. This fact makes the parable all the more suitable for the time of preparing for first communion, since this time is set aside for the supreme enjoyment of the knowledge of God.” (RPC2, 55)

The same young mother, now several years older, recalls that her daughter continues to speak of the True Vine and the relationship with the branches. After experiencing the death of a beloved uncle, the daughter at bedtime prayer, said, “Thank you God for taking care of Uncle Matt, now his branch is even closer, wrapped around the trunk of the true vine.”

This is but a sampling of the riches found in this parable. More can be found in Sofia’s writings. In closing here are some of Sofia’s words describing her experiences of sharing the true vine parable with children, which describes children that have encountered the Word of God and responded with joy:

This Parable has been present from the very start of our work with the older children; but over time it has come to acquire an ever greater place in the Catechesis, particularly in the special encounters with the First Communion candidates. We have now arrived at the point where it is difficult for us not to return to it constantly—and almost exclusively—during these encounters, because this Biblical text evokes such delight that we lack the courage to go on to another theme. From the very beginning we have noticed a phenomenon about these encounters dedicated to the True Vine: for the children they are always “too short,” and they “last only five minutes.” (TDCGS, 48) May the child’s longing to continue to linger with the image of the true vine inspire us to consider what riches this parable holds for us.

Sources:
The Development of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd – Sofia Cavalletti

The Religious Potential of the Child: 6 to 12 Years Old – Sofia Cavalletti

Ways to Nurture the Relationship with God – Sofia Cavalletti and Patricia Coulter