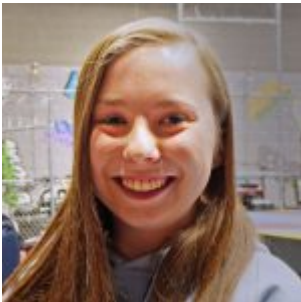


# Cast members of high school *Godspell* production find surprising insights to faith

It's not easy being Jesus. Or Judas for that matter.

Fresh off a week of performances, students at St. Joseph High School in Red Deer are reflecting on their roles in the school's production of *Godspell*, the musical based on the Gospel of Matthew, and the lasting legacy on their faith journey.



**Francesca Schoettler**

"It's definitely helped me grow a lot," said Francesca Schoettler, a Grade 12 student who played Uzo, one of Jesus' disciples in the March 13-16th performances at Red Deer College. "When we go to Mass every week or read the Bible, we're hearing them in such a different light because we've been involved in these parables.

"We have firsthand seen the change. As actors, our character becomes who you are sometimes. Being involved in these things really opens our eyes to God and His call for us in our lives."



**Christopher Marcinek**

“I can see where the pleasures of the world can get in the way of our faith,” added Christopher Marcinek, a Grade 11 student who played the role of Judas. “It’s allowed me to get a new view on the Bible and to study it on whole new level. It’s pretty cool.”

Through a blend of songs ranging in style from pop to vaudeville, *Godspell*’s story of Jesus’ life in dances across the stage. The musical culminates in the Last Supper and Crucifixion, bringing to life His message of kindness, tolerance and love. It was the second theatre production for St. Joseph High, which opened just last year.

First performed in 1973, *Godspell* had an original cast dressed as hippies. In Red Deer, 11-member cast and 14 crew used a revised 2012 version of the play, set on an inner-city street against a brick wall with each cast member’s name in graffiti. The stage is surrounded by a chain link fence that’s “electrified” – the lights are turned off to electric guitar music – to symbolize Jesus’ Crucifixion.

Although it’s a different version, *Godspell*’s message is unchanged, said Jennifer Cocolicchio, the performing arts teacher who directed the St. Joseph’s production.

“It’s about Jesus’ life and the meaning of that life,” she said. “Anyone can be inspired by that message of love and community and loving your fellow man and supporting and accepting each other. It’s a relevant message in this day and age and in all ages. And it’s fun. It’s a lot of fun.”

“It’s been a really rewarding journey to be able to connect to our faith, to discuss our faith as a cast and as a crew, and to be able to talk about the larger ramifications in the world.”



Jennifer Cocolicchio, teacher and Artistic Director Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

In any play, it's said there are no small roles. In *Godspell*, none is as big as Jesus himself – played by Grade 12 student Noah Friesen. So, did he feel any pressure playing the Son of God?

"I think it's almost easier because you have a lot more sources to go off of," said Friesen, a veteran of high school plays. "You can kind of read through the Bible and be like 'That's what He said. That's what His motivation was behind that,' so then I can apply that onto the stage.

Friesen said everyone has their own interpretation of Jesus. And that was reflected in the casting choice of the tall, blond student in the leading role. "There were a couple of liberties taken there!" he said with a laugh.

Friesen, and other cast members, say participating in the play has helped them see the growth in their characters – and given them a new appreciation for the biblical figures they portrayed. They say they've learned that, like most situations in life, it's never black and white.

"It's an interesting contrast to see the growth of my character from being this faithful follower to being someone who betrays Jesus in the end," said Marcinek, who portrayed Judas. "When he first started to follow Jesus, he was like 'Hey, this guy will save us,' but I think Judas had a different interpretation of what saving was.

"Maybe he was looking at him more as the overthrowing (occupier) Rome kind of person, rather than a person of peace ... It's all about what's good for me. I think that's where Jesus and Judas clash the most. I think that's what led Judas to betray him in the end; it's because he lost his faith in Jesus."

Is Marcinek even sympathetic to Judas? "Think about who God has called. He's called sinners ... No one's perfect and we aren't expected to be. God's willingness to forgive us is what I think is just so beautiful and so powerful, even to the point of the person who betrays Jesus and still forgiving him anyway."

Francesca Schoettler's Uzo, one of Jesus' disciples best described as a Mother Earth-type character, questions God from the start – a reflection of her own personal journey and that of many others.

"Her moment with God is that she sings this beautiful song called *By My Side*. Most of the characters, we all have these moments with Jesus where we act with Noah or sing a song or we lead a parable that shows these characters are getting on to it," Schoettler said.

"We use these parables and these characters to show different people in the world and how we all find God in different ways," Schoettler said.

"We see God and we see Jesus and wonder 'Who is this and what does

this mean for us?' Throughout the play, Jesus shows that there are ways through different parables, through different songs, through different methods, he helps each character falls in love with God, to truly believe in Him regardless of every struggle."

One of the few Catholics in her immediate family, Schoettler can relate to her character's journey.

"Definitely when I was younger, I had a hard time believing in God. Finding God in my own way was really important and crucial for me. It's helped me see the world much more clearly."

Marcinek grew up in a Catholic home. But he only began to really understand his faith after years of attending Our Lady of Victory summer camp at Gull Lake, northwest of Red Deer. Last year he made what he calls an intentional decision to explore his faith more deeply.

"I saw all of these faith-filled people all around me and I'm like 'Hey, maybe they're onto something, maybe I can go into this.' A year after that, I decided I'm going to try.

"It was only when I decided to really delve into it, to really give it a shot, that's when I really grew in my faith and that's where I found it."

Asked how the play has affected him on a personal level, Friesen said it's reflected in his favourite song of the musical, *All for the Best*.

"It talks about the different ideologies between Jesus and Judas," Friesen said. "And how Jesus has this idea that, wow, everything in your life may be negative and everything seems to be going wrong. You know that once you get to heaven, you will be blessed by God. So in the end, it's all for the best."

In this version of the play, each character represents a country of the word. For their teacher, the message of *Godspell* is reflected in her favourite song, *Beautiful City* – a ballad sung by Jesus – which was added in the revised 2012 version.

"We may not be able to build heaven on Earth. We may not be able to build a city of angels. But we can certainly build a city of men. And that's something to work towards."