

By Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Open a bible and light a candle at the center of your group.

LEADER: Loving God, you are kind and merciful.

ALL: Bring out in us all that Jesus teaches.

LEADER: Let us value curiosity in our conversations.

ALL: Let us learn what matters to our neighbors.

LEADER: Let us share mother to mother, father to father.

ALL: Let us value our neighbors for all that makes each unique.

LEADER: Let us value our likenesses over our differences—

ALL: And invest our best selves in building community among us.

Jesus continues his sermon on the mount in Sunday's gospel, teaching sayings now familiar—turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, love your neighbor, and love your enemies. Such actions show respect and build community among us who otherwise remain strangers to each other.

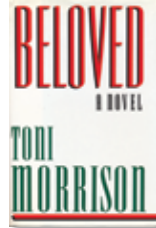
In her Nobel Prize winning novels, Toni Morrison makes real the suffering of slaves through the individual lives of her characters, whose indestructible hope and love affirm their humanity and ours. She died in August 2019 at 88.

Toni Morrison published her first book *The Bluest Eye*

at 39 about a black girl who wishes she were white. Morrison wrote at night or in the early morning as she worked as an editor for Random House and raised two sons. Morrison compiled *The Black Book*, three centuries of African American history—clippings, photos, handbills. In the process she found an article about Margaret Garner, a fugitive slave who, facing capture, killed her infant daughter rather than return her to slavery.

This story gives Morrison her central character Sethe in *Beloved*, the novel that won the Pulitzer Prize in 1998. As the book begins we feel Sethe's shame at the bullwhip lashes that scar her back. Her master used her like a brood sow to produce more slaves. Mothers watched their babies and young children sold off as chattel.

The violence slaves survived is horrible and historical. Sethe had seen the bit. "Men, boys, little girls, women. The wildness that shot up into the eye the moment the lips were yanked back. Days after it was taken out, goose fat was rubbed on the corners of the mouth but



©Timothy Greenfield-Sanders / Courtesy of Magnolia Pictures

Nobel Prize Laureate Toni Morrison in "Toni Morrison: The Pieces I Am," a Magnolia Pictures release.

nothing to sooth the tongue or take the wildness out of the eye."

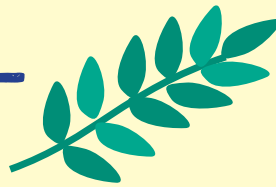
Interviews called "slave narratives" give former slaves voice and witness, the dignity of speaking about their experience in their own words. These voices speak in Morrison's stories.

Paul D describes his lasting bond that held together with Sethe. "She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order. It's good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind."

● In what books have you glimpsed how people survive cruel oppression?

GOSPEL

Jesus teaches us to love our enemies.



OLD LAW: You have heard it said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.”

JESUS: But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. If anyone strikes you on the right check, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give the person your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

OLD LAW: You have heard it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.”

JESUS: But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for God makes the sun rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Don't even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Matthew 5:38-48

the violence and hate others visit on us. The saying, “Do not resist an evildoer,” calls Christians to nonviolent resistance to injury. Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. have taught us nonviolent resistance takes courage and has soul power.

Nonviolence aims to stop violence from escalating and engulfing a wider circle like bar fight after a few beers. Nonviolent resistance takes courage, and in the case of protests, it takes training. It is action. It means standing face to face with an evildoer as an equal and offering one's face for another hit rather than giving a fist in return.

A second hit becomes needless and deliberate, revealing the violent to themselves. This is what happened during the Civil Rights marches when firemen couldn't turn the fire hoses one more time on the children willing to march after all the adults were in jail.

Jesus offers a prophetic alternative to violence; he wants us to make neighbors even of enemies. He calls us to community with our neighbors and active commitment to the well being of all—to those who need coats and loans, to the violent from whom we must help others keep safe.

● **What value have you experienced in turning the other cheek?**

What does Jesus expect of his followers?

In creating his gospel, Matthew uses Mark's narrative and adds many more of Jesus' sayings and parables. In chapters five to seven, Matthew creates the scene in which Jesus gives a lengthy sermon with people gathered around him on one of the hills that surround the Sea of Galilee on the north. The sayings are recipes for living as a community of love and care. For four weeks the Church has been hearing Jesus' sermon.

After turning the social order upside down with beatitudes that bless the poor and sorrowing and then calling

disciples to be salt and light, Jesus started contrasting the laws of Moses and the prophets with his new law. The words “but I say to you” introduce each teaching. More than not kill, Jesus expects us to deal with anger in ourselves and our families. More than not commit adultery, Jesus expects disciples to keep the invisible desires of our hearts faithful to our spouses. Jesus calls us to stand on our word, not make shallow promises.

In the gospel this week, Jesus asks us to commit to a level of self-giving like his own, to put ourselves at risk to transform

● How do you treat someone who needs help making ends meet?

● When have you done more for a person than he or she asked? What happened?

● Which of Jesus' teachings do you most easily dismiss?



People join hands to pack food to stop hunger.

The sermon on the mount shows Israel's moral standards evolving. When Jesus cites the old law in this passage, he doesn't recall one of the ten commandments. Instead he begins, "You have heard it said, 'An eye for an eye.'" As a moral standard this code sounds barbaric today, especially when we hear cases in which law punishes thieves by cutting off their hands or other literal applications of this ancient code.

Talion, as the eye for an eye code is called, makes punishment proportionate to a wrong. In this talion takes a step forward from the code of vengeance, which set no limits on retaliation for a wrong.

In Sunday's gospel Jesus asks us to take God as our standard in how to treat others. God makes the sun shine and rain fall on the just and unjust alike.

In this Jesus goes beyond the golden rule which he quotes later in the sermon on the mount—"In everything do unto others as you would have them

do unto you; for this is the law and the prophets" (Matthew 7.12). The golden rule makes us ourselves the standard of how to treat others.

To respond to enemies and evil with conscious, gracious, undeserved compassion goes farther. This is how a life-giving, loving, merciful God acts.

● When have you made a neighbor of a seeming enemy? What prompted the change?

● Who is at risk in your neighborhood? How can you help?

Jesus exhorts us to be perfect as God is perfect. *Perfect* is a word that can torment us. Marketers bombard us with images of the perfect body, the perfect home, the perfect hair style, the perfect education, the perfect children, the perfect job, and then, of course, the perfect retirement plan.

So what can we say about Jesus' exhortation to be perfect

as God is perfect? One scripture scholar suggests that a better translation of the word *perfect* would be *fully alive*. Perfect implies finished, completed, perfected. When one is perfect, nothing more can be done.

When one is fully alive, one is whole and wholly operational. We are able to use all our human capacities to know and love others, to live the values and strengthen the bonds that hold us together as families, neighborhoods, and a nation.

Being fully alive implies engaging new people, events, and needs with our whole selves. The whole person notices the person who needs a coat as well as a shirt. The whole person can reflect and decide what to lend the borrower. St. Irenaeus said in the 4th century, "The glory of God is the human being fully alive."

● What is a choice that has built up resentment in you?

● What is a choice that opened a way to live Jesus' new law?

● What capacities do others count on you to bring to parish or neighborhood conflicts?

● Who works to heal enmities in your area? How might your group initiate conversations?

Be holy for God is holy.

The gospel ends with Jesus motivating us to be perfect as God is perfect. In these words Jesus echoes the words that begin the Holiness Code, the collection of laws in Leviticus 19.

A quick glance through Leviticus 19 reveals an amazing collection of rules: a prohibition against idol worship, laws dealing with agriculture and animal husbandry, labor relations, the justice system, the sacrificial system, proper treatment of slaves, barbering, fortunetelling, and more. Repeatedly rules end, as does Sunday's first reading, "I am the Holy One."

The most universal of these laws tells us that to be holy means to love our neighbors as ourselves. We participate in the holiness of God when we use our capacity to love and reach beyond ourselves.

Holy has come to mean pious. Holy people are saints;

most of us are sinners. To be holy means to be different from and separate from the ordinary. God is holy, and so are a few other people.

Theologian Karl Rahner wrote an article about the name of God in which he suggests that we stop using the word *God* and find other names. His best replacement for the word *God* is "Holy Mystery."

In this context *mystery* doesn't mean something we solve, but something larger than ourselves in which we are held throughout our lives. The word *holy* makes that clear. Holy identifies ultimate Mystery with God but in a way that invites and attracts us to learn more. The holy evokes awe and fascination.

So, be holy as God is holy! That is to say be alive, be immersed in Mystery, let mystery attract you. Be in communion with all the neighbors in whom Holy Mystery lives.

Love your neighbor.

The Holy One said to Moses, "Speak to the whole Israelite community and tell them: Be holy, for I, the Holy One, your God, am

holy. You shall not bear hatred in your heart for any of your kin. Though you may have to reprove your neighbors, do not incur sin because of them. Take no revenge and cherish no grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Holy One."

Leviticus 19.1-2,17-18

- Who is a holy person you know? Why do you say this person is holy?
- Gather together the characteristics of holiness that emerge in your conversation.

PRAY

Take two or three minutes of silence to surface the word or phrase from the gospel that sticks with you and perhaps calls you to action in the coming week.

LEADER: What words or phrases stay in our minds and hearts today?
Each responds aloud.

LEADER: Let us bear no hatred for friend or foe.

All: You call us to love our neighbors as ourselves.

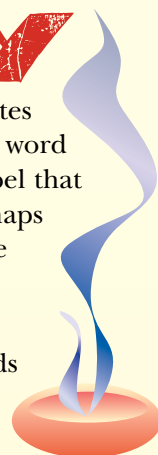
LEADER: Holy Mystery, merciful and gracious.

All: You call us to be wholly alive as you are.

LEADER: Do we not remember we are the temple of God?

All: The Spirit of God dwells in us.

Joan Mitchell, CSJ, the editor of SUNDAY BY SUNDAY, holds a Masters of Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School and a Ph.D. in New Testament from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN.



DO SOMETHING

CHARITY

JUSTICE

- See the documentary film "Toni Morrison: The Pieces I Am."
- Become a regular visitor to the Catholic Relief Services website, crs.org. Established by the U.S. bishops, CRS works for justice and an end to poverty around the globe—crs.org.

From their website: "Where people are fighting over water, CRS builds a well. Where tribal groups disagree about boundaries, CRS brings the sides together to talk. When false, inflammatory information can spark violence, CRS empowers a radio station to get the facts out. We call this peacebuilding."