

# SUNDAY

## by SUNDAY

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

**P**lace a bible open to John 14 and a budding or flowering branch at the center of your group. Have vigil lights and matches available, so each person can light a light for a loved one as he or she responds to the question at the end of the page.

**LEADER:** In joy we celebrate Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

**ALL:** The God of all that is promises life beyond death.

**LEADER:** Because Jesus lives, we will live.

**ALL:** His Spirit abides in us.

**A**t a parish panel on ordaining women deacons, I visited with Father Jim, another panel member, newly retired from 30 years in hospice work. In his presentation Father Jim explained that he had worked with many women in hospice and had seen women's vocation to service in action. Those most effective in hospice ministry have a sense of vocation, he said. For them, accompanying people in the last months and weeks of their lives is a not a job but a calling, a way to use their gifts to serve others and live out their baptismal call.

I had just finished reading Paul Kalanithi's memoir *When Breath Becomes Air*, a young neurosurgeon's inspiring story of living fully as he faces terminal lung cancer. I recommended the book to Father Jim. In his last days the doctor loves to hold the baby that he and his wife decide to have along the journey. His wife finishes the book he wants to write. The title refers to the moment of death.

I shared with Father Jim that in our family someone often comes for the person who is dying. My mother told Dad that his father, a beloved man already gone to God, was coming for her. Father Jim says this is common. These stories of those already with God being present with the dying have deepened his faith in resurrection.

**R**ecently my brother and some of his family were paging through the family album. My brother received a living-donor liver transplant from his son, Jason. On one page a photo caught Jason's eye. "Who is this?" he wanted

to know. "This woman was sitting beside my bed every time I woke up in the hospital after the transplant." He had never told anyone about this. The woman in the photo was my mom, who died several years before he was born.

My siblings and I have experienced mother with us at times. She has now been dead two years longer than the 51 years she lived. But she hasn't left us orphans any more than Jesus leaves his disciples orphans. Somehow we continue in and with each other as Jesus promises in Sunday's gospel.

● When have you experienced a loved one with you?



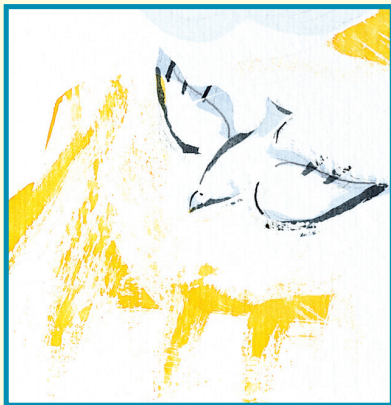
# GOSPEL

## I am in my Father, you in me, and I in you.

**NARRATOR:** Jesus spoke to his disciples.

**JESUS 1:** If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, who will give you another Advocate to abide with you always: the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot accept, since it neither sees nor recognizes the Spirit; but you know the Spirit because the Spirit abides with you and will be in you.

**JESUS 2:** I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.



**JESUS 3:** Those who have my commandments and keep them are the ones who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father. I too will love them and reveal myself to them.

John 14:15-21

## Farewells are wrenching.

by Julie Neraas

Jesus' farewell continues in Sunday's gospel. The conversation takes place after the last supper (John 13) and before Jesus' passion (John 18-19). A feeling of impending doom haunts Jesus' words. We Christians today know how the story turns out. Yet for us as for Jesus' disciples, facing death takes us to the edge of knowing.

We try to peer and peer and peer again into the future by means of our imaginative capacities and by leaning on

our heartfelt hopes, but try as we may, we cannot see the contours of the next life. Our minds shrink back while trying to fathom it. Faith is necessary in the face of death, because the truth of another life beyond this one is so much larger than the facts.

For the disciples, Jesus' looming death is wrenching. They cannot understand how this stupendous teacher, miracle worker, and beloved rabbi will meet a brutal end so soon. The

weight of this impending loss must be why the author of John's gospel spends so much time on Jesus' leave taking and farewell. Jesus' absence and new presence are two faces of a central crisis for the early church.

The disciples are scared and uncertain what they are to do after Jesus leaves. Should they go back to their families and return to their fishing nets? How should they conduct their ministry? Who is to be in charge? Where are they to find sufficient strength?

● How would you feel in the disciples' place?

Jesus speaks first to his disciples' most primal fear. Call it separation, call it abandonment, call it aloneness. Jesus wants his disciples to know that while death will end his earthly life, it cannot and will not end their relationship. Jesus promises his friends a new relationship with him, an abiding comfort and help, "another Advocate to abide with you always."

Thanks to the pervasive power of God's love, there is nowhere his friends can go where God is not, and nowhere they can go where the Spirit is not, or where Christ is not. The hour of Jesus' death approaches, but his friends will not be orphans.

In fact, through their relationship with him,





diversity in our world are missions for us who are Jesus' disciples today.

● **To what is the Holy Spirit prompting you this Easter season?**

● **In whom do you hear the Holy Spirit speaking and inviting you to action?**



## Jesus' first followers experience persecution.

**T**he context of our story from Acts, the eighth chapter, is the persecution of the young church in Jerusalem. These days are perilous for those who had followed Jesus. The conflict becomes so violent that many leave Jerusalem and flee for safety to the regions of Judea and Samaria.

Stephen, one of the first seven deacons appointed to serve the community, becomes the first Christian martyr for his preaching. Opponents stone him to death for proclaiming that in Jesus the Righteous One has come.

Saul, who becomes Paul, approves of Stephen's stoning. In fact, he "was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, committing them to prison" (Acts 8:3). What an irony! The person whose influence in shaping the early

church is absolutely central, is initially a religious zealot.

The persecutions do not frighten everyone into silence. Philip, another disciple among the first appointed deacons in the Jerusalem community, goes to Samaria, where he preaches and performs miracles of healing and exorcism. Philip baptizes many. His mission greatly encourages the faithful in Jerusalem, who send Peter and John to join him.

The newly baptized in Samaria have not received the Holy Spirit until Peter and John lay their hands on them, channeling the current of God's presence into those gathered. With the coming of the Spirit, the new community in Samaria has all it needs to continue.

## Philip preaches in Samaria.

**Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them. The crowds with one accord listened eagerly to what was said by Philip, hearing and seeing the signs that he did. Unclean spirits, crying with loud shrieks, came out of many who were possessed; and many others who were paralyzed or lame were cured. There was great joy in that city.**

**Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been**

they will participate in Jesus' relationship with God—"I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you." His Spirit will abide with them and prompt them to live as Jesus lived, to embody his words and continue his deeds.

● **When have you experienced that Jesus has not left you orphaned?**

**J**esus assures his disciples that they have everything they need for their lives and mission after he is gone. They are to keep his commandments. In these last words in Sunday's gospel, Jesus repeats that loving one another puts us in relationship with him, his Father, and the Spirit who abides in us. The intangible bonds of love, friendship, discipleship last. The small and large gestures that make love visible last. Tenderness lasts and gets passed down generations in parents' care for their kids, in friends' presence in difficult times.

Jesus entrusts his first disciples and us with his mission to invest our hearts and hands in families and friends and extend them beyond. Building community and welcoming



**baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.**

**Acts 8.5-8, 14-17**

**F**ast forward 2,000 years to our time, when many also utter threats in the name of God against other people. Religion continues to be both a tremendous force for good and a tremendous force for evil.

Nothing makes us kinder, more compassionate, or more willing to sacrifice our self interest for the sake of another than religion. Yet nothing makes us more dangerous than blind obedience, whether to a creed or a teacher. Nothing is more fraught with peril than being wedded to ends that justify violent means, often wrapped in religious language.

In our contemporary focus on religious extremists, particularly those within Islam, we may forget that both Judaism and Christianity have violence in their beginnings. Moses, the prophet and early leader of the Jews, murdered an Egyptian, when he saw the Egyptian oppressing one of his Hebrew relatives. The dynamic, expansive missionary Paul was initially the rampaging, religious zealot Saul.

Thankfully Paul's conversion leads him to the mind-blowing insight that the human family is interconnected and that in Christ there is neither male nor female,

Greek nor Jew; we are all one (Galatians 3.28). We Christians name the power that makes us aware of this truth as the Holy Spirit, yet other religions have language for the unity of all things as well.

Buddhism identifies this oneness in its concept of nonduality or interbeing. In Hinduism there is a belief that the divine resides in every human soul: Brahman (the ground of all being) and Atman, (the individual) are one. "Atman is Brahman. Brahman is Atman."

Science brings its own language to the conversation about the indisputable truth that all is one. In one of the hopeful aspects of our time, scientists are in conversation with theologians, biblical scholars, ecologists, cosmologists, and others, proclaiming what religious traditions have celebrated for thousands of years: all life is one.

Whether we are talking particles or waves, neutrons or protons, or whales, humans, and hummingbirds, all are part of One Holy Web, one holy symphony. We in the West are so enamored of the individual self that we have to keep working to remember that God ordained connectivity. This brings us back where this reflection began—with Jesus' reassurance that he and his disciples and their Creator are bound in an intricate communion that cannot be broken.

● **What examples can you name of the violent use of religion?**

● **What can quell such violent impulses in human beings?**

● **How have you experienced the oneness of all things?**

● **Who do you know whose life has changed dramatically as Saul's did?**

# PRAY

**LEADER:** As Paul writes to the Christians in Ephesus, "May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, give you a Spirit of wisdom and revelation."

**ALL:** **May the eyes of our hearts be enlightened.**

**LEADER:** May we know God's power for us who believe.

**ALL:** **May we live in the hope that Jesus' resurrection gives us.**

**LEADER:** We are Easter people.

**ALL:** **We are the heart and hands of Christ in our world.**



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