

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Open a bible on a low table at the center of your group and place three unlighted candles beside it. Renew your faith in our welcoming and life-sharing God.

LEADER: (*lights first candle*) I light this candle in the name of the Great I Am who first separated light from darkness and breathed life into us.

ALL: *In the name of God who gives us light and life.*

LEADER: (*lights second candle*) I light this candle in the name of Jesus who gives us the light of his self-giving life to follow.

ALL: *In the name of Jesus who gives light to our lives.*

LEADER: (*lights third candle*) I light this candle in the name of the Spirit who moves every being and inflames us with yearning for community.

ALL: *In the name of the Spirit who inspires us to welcome every creature as kin. Blessed be God's name, the Trinity who holds us in love.*

When I first entered the novitiate of the Sisters of St. Joseph and had all the time in the world to read, a friend gave me the 800-page book, *The Brothers Karamazov*. It fit my circumstances. One of the four brothers becomes a monk. His more worldly siblings taunt him with the failings of the Christian church. Halfway through the novel the author,

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, has one of the brothers tell the monk the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor, in which Jesus returns and comes among the people teaching them their dignity. But the Grand Inquisitor, like some officials in Jesus' lifetime, sees him as a troublemaker and has him arrested.

The inquisitor talks with Jesus and admits he knows who Jesus is, but he criticizes Jesus for refusing the more commanding roles the devil offered him. The inquisitor thinks Jesus should have turned stones into bread as Satan suggested. What people want is food not freedom, security and assurance, not invitations to serve and love.

The inquisitor explains the Church must do what Jesus unwisely refused to do—give people the food and certainty they want. The inquisitor doesn't want any liberating savior stirring people up to live by more than bread alone. He spares Jesus' life but sends him away unwelcome.

This portrait of the inquisitor so disturbed me that I stopped reading the book and didn't touch it for three years.



Imagining a high and holy church official recognizing but rejecting Jesus made me profoundly afraid. Like the young monk, I was giving my life to serve in the church. My family, like his, saw little worth in my choice. Was I falling prey to an institution that masked callous power in the wrappings of love and service?

Today the sexual abuse scandals have disillusioned many Catholics. The abuse of privilege and power can give us our own reasons to send Jesus away. However, it can also challenge us to live the gospels with integrity ourselves. We can lead lives of self-giving and integrity. We can follow Jesus, who shows us self-giving is God's way.

● **What, if anything, disturbs your faith and commitment?**

GOSPEL

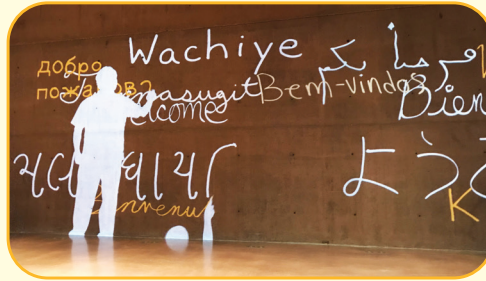
Jesus calls us to find our lives.

JESUS 1: Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

JESUS 2: Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and

whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.

Matthew 10:37-42



Faith in Jesus challenges us to love as he loved.

The two sayings in Sunday's gospel conclude Matthew's missionary discourse: Jesus' instructions to his disciples on how to continue his mission and gather his harvest among the peoples of the world. Jesus addresses the twelve in this discourse. The sayings also speak to us who follow Jesus 2,000 years later.

Last Sunday Jesus instructed his followers to proclaim his good news from the rooftops. He promised that those who acknowledge him, he will acknowledge before his Father.

Jesus' sayings in this Sunday's gospel contrast family ties with the faith ties of those who follow him and belong to his new

community. To believe in Jesus is a relationship so fundamental that it claims deeper allegiance than family ties.

The men and women who followed Jesus during his lifetime left their homes and livelihoods literally to walk with him. For example, James and John left their father's fishing nets. Their mother also left their home and followed Jesus (Matthew 20:20-21), as did other women of Galilee (27:55-56).

To follow Jesus means taking up his cross. His way is not a road to glory but a road of costly self-giving. Those who give their lives in doing what Jesus did will find their lives, he promises. Discipleship demands willingness to walk the walk

Jesus did, to trust God that one will find one's life in giving it.

- What family conflicts does your faith generate?
- What testimony can you give to the truth of Jesus' paradox that those who lose their lives for his sake will find them?

Jesus' first saying anticipates that faith in him will divide family members. Often today the first meaning people hear in the word *faith* refers to the beliefs that set Christians apart from other religions or the beliefs that distinguish Catholics from other Christian denominations.

Faith, however, has a more basic meaning. Faith is relationship, a whole-hearted entrusting of one's life to whom or what one considers ultimate.

In faith we entrust our hearts beyond the confines of our individual selves. We risk our lives and gifts.

Faith in Jesus is a relationship so basic that it changes every other relationship. We choose self-giving as our way of life as it was for Jesus.

In friendships we find ourselves when we risk faith, trust, and love for another. We often experience the truth of Jesus' way of life when we serve others but wind up benefiting more ourselves. We find God in bridging the space between us.

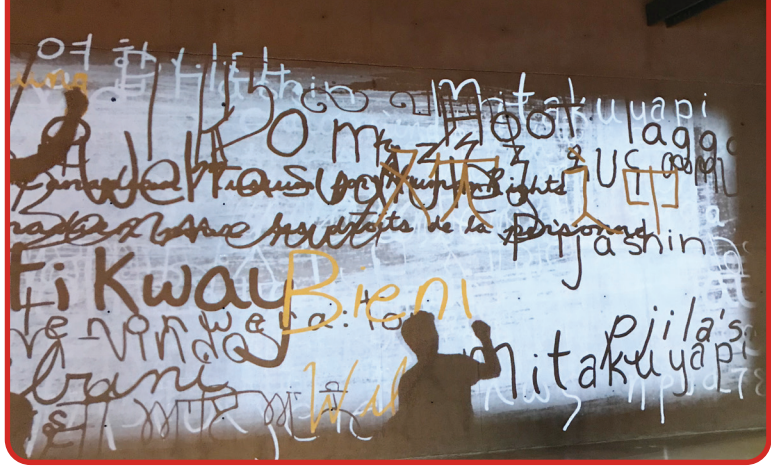
The cross expresses Jesus' total self-giving and calls us into the paradox of Christian

life. In giving ourselves, we find ourselves.

- What is an example of a relationship in which giving of yourself helped you find yourself?
- What does the cross symbolize for you?

The second set of Jesus' sayings in Sunday's gospel culminates all the instructions to disciples that Matthew collects in chapter 10. These sayings apply the principle of reciprocity to a central theme in Matthew's gospel—hospitality. The way we welcome people into our lives is the way we welcome Jesus. Only Matthew among the four evangelists includes these sayings in his gospel.

Hospitality is a fundamental Christian ethic, one any Christian can practice by welcoming another to dinner or giving a thirsty person a cold drink. In chapter 25 Matthew makes hospitality the criteria for who will enter the kingdom of God. God acknowledges and welcomes into the kingdom those who have given drink to the thirsty, food to the hungry, clothes to the naked, and hospitality to the stranger.



On a smart wall as one enters the Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg, silhouetted figures write the word *welcome* in the languages of the world.

Jesus welcomes us to his table at every Eucharist and sends us forth to gather others into communion. If we were to write a legend for our time, we might describe a stranger joining our block party. He is saying those who lose their life will find it. We welcome him but get him off the topic, "Have a beer and chill. We have the game on speaker." Then we notice Jesus looks middle eastern and his talk about people losing their life sounds threatening. Call 911 just to be safe.

Pope Francis has weighed in on hospitality to panhandlers. "It's always right to give to someone in need," he said, directing us also to look directly at the persons begging and treat them with respect.

The more violent acts dominate news coverage the more pervasive the threat of violence seems. Every stranger becomes a threat rather than a potential friend.

To rebuild community in our urban and suburban neighborhoods, we need to learn our neighbors' names and those of their children. We need to exercise safe ways of welcoming new people into our lives.

Sunday's short sayings summarize the whole way Matthew understands Jesus' message. Our hospitality matters. Human and Christian community depend on hospitality. It is the means for gathering all into communion at God's table.

- Who has welcomed you at their table?
- How does your parish community welcome newcomers?
- What strangers in your neighborhood do you fear? How might people work together to find safe ways to welcome them?

DO SOMETHING

CHARITY

JUSTICE

- Challenge yourself to be more hospitable. Walk around the neighborhood and greet people. Stay after church to coffee and visit. Attend a 4th of July picnic or ball game or fireworks and celebrate our country with your neighbors.
- Read Malcolm Gladwell's book *Talking to Strangers: What We Should Know About the People We Don't*.

A woman welcomes the prophet Elisha.

From Israel's traditions we hear this Sunday an ancient story about the value of hospitality. Traditions of hospitality stretch back to Israel's earliest ancestors, Abraham and Sarah.

This childless couple welcome three strangers to their tent in Genesis 18. The strangers ask only for a little water, a place to rest, and a bit of bread. Abraham and Sarah do more. They kill a fatted calf and bring out curds and milk. Only after they express their hospitality do the strangers reveal they are divine messengers who announce God will fulfill the promise of a child the next year.

In Sunday's first reading a wealthy woman insists the prophet Elisha share her table and her home. In fact, the prophet becomes her regular guest. As an unexpected return for her hospitality, she receives a gift only God can give—the child she has not been able to conceive.

Unexpected guests put our hospitality to the test. Our hospitality expresses not only our attitude toward others but our attitude toward God.

The reward of hospitality.

One day Elisha was passing through Shunem, where a wealthy woman lived, who urged him to have a meal. So whenever he passed that way, he would stop there for a meal. She said to her husband, "Look, I am sure that this man who regularly passes our house is a holy man of God. Let us make a small roof chamber with walls, and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp, so that he can stay there whenever he comes to us."

One day when he came there, Elisha went up to the chamber and lay down.

Elisha asked his servant, "What then may be done for this woman?"

Gehazi answered, "She has no son, and her husband is old."

Elisha said, "Call her." When he had called her, she stood at the door. He said, "At this season, in due time, you shall embrace a son."

2 Kings 4.8-11,14-16

- When has your hospitality been rewarded many times over what you gave?
- What gifts have strangers brought to your home and family?

PRAY

Conclude your reflection on the Sunday gospels by deciding to show someone hospitality, then pray together with these words from Romans 6.3-4, Sunday's second reading.

LEADER: Are you aware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

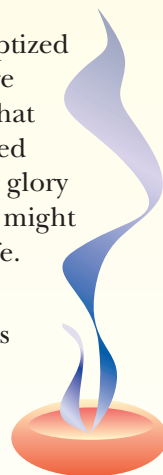
ALL: We are.

LEADER: And that baptized into his death we were buried with him, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

ALL: We are.

LEADER: Jesus frees us from darkness.

ALL: We walk in the light of Christ.



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



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