

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Place an open bible and lighted candle at the center of your group. Surround it with the most hopeful headlines you find in recent newspapers.

**LEADER:** Loving God, we gather in your name to praise you.

**ALL:** Our ordinary lives are sacred, holy in your eyes.

**LEADER:** Let us remember our hands are your hands in our world.

**ALL:** We are holy in your eyes.

**LEADER:** You give us the gift of life.

**ALL:** We are holy in your eyes.

**LEADER:** We welcome your grace and mercy as we share our faith and our lives today.

**ALL:** We are holy in your eyes.

A woman in a recent class described an upbringing that taught her denial. She learned to choose the hardest and most disgusting tasks and eat what she didn't like rather than ever pursue what delighted her.

Jesus recommends denying oneself in Sunday's gospel. "Those who want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up the cross and follow me," he says. The parents who raised their daughter to

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# SUNDAY

## by SUNDAY

practice denial may have sought to identify with Jesus' suffering as have many saints.

This saying focuses only on the end of Jesus' life. It leaves out Jesus' coming among the people to heal the sick, free the possessed, and reveal God's nearness and love in our midst. Jesus lived his prophetic mission all his days and faced the consequences in death at Roman hands.

God raised Jesus to new life. His resurrection calls us to faith that new life is always possible—in relationships, in work for peace, in sustaining Earth.

How do we imitate Jesus' self-giving as well as his suffering? Most of us answer day by day over our lifetimes in our relationships. I resist a call to martyrdom. Jesus himself resisted the cup in his prayers in the garden before his arrest.

Archbishop Romero and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave their energies to prophetic preaching and paid the price. Sister Dorothy Stang kept hanging her hammock in another outpost farther into the Amazon rain forest as she worked with teams to start faith communities and to keep land for poor farmers in Brazil. She sought justice, not martyrdom.

We give our energies daily to work and family commitments. Fresh crumbs fall on our floors every day as we cook, eat, clean, wash. Young parents exhaust themselves with round-the-clock care for a new baby. Spouses accompany one another through doctors' appointments, blood draws, and treatments in sickness. Daily we give of ourselves in loving one another.

● What did you learn about how to follow Jesus in your family upbringing?



Sister Dorothy Stang

# GOSPEL

## Jesus is a messiah who will suffer.



**NARRATOR:** From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

**PETER:** God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.

**NARRATOR:** But Jesus turned and said to Peter,

**JESUS:** Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.

**NARRATOR:** Then Jesus told his disciples—

**JESUS:** Those who want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives for my sake will find them. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their lives? Or what will they give in return for their lives? For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will reward everyone according to what each has done.

Matthew 16.21-27

Jerusalem and the seeming contradiction that the messiah must suffer. From the time of Peter's confession of faith, the narrative anticipates the messiah's astounding destiny: death on a Roman cross.

- What is a turning point you have experienced in your life?
- What led up to the turning point?
- From that time on, how did your direction change?

Many people in Jesus' time expected a warrior messiah, who would restore Israel to independence and power. A messiah who suffers and dies contradicts this popular idea of the messiah's might and mission. A powerless messiah seems no messiah at all. In Sunday's gospel Peter, on whose faith the Christian community builds, wrestles with the contradiction.

When Peter first hears Jesus predict his passion, he responds to prevent it. Immediately and sharply, Jesus tells Peter to back off, referring to him as Satan and a stumbling block—strong language. Peter gets the label Satan for thinking superficially with his mind on human rather than divine things.

Three times Jesus predicts his suffering, death, and resurrection on the third day. The repeated predictions remind us readers that we

## What does following Jesus ask of us?

Peter's confession, the gospel for last Sunday, is a turning point in Matthew's gospel. The narrative builds toward Peter's affirmation that Jesus is the messiah.

In chapters 5-7 Matthew's gospel pictures Jesus as the giver of the new law, which he teaches in his sermon on the mount. In chapters 8 and 9 Jesus heals the sick and frees the possessed. In chapter 13, Jesus uses parables to sow the promise of God's kingdom in the lives and imaginations of his disciples and the crowds who hear him. He

insists that tiny mustard seeds can grow into bushes where the birds of the air nest. He insists on patience when weeds grow along with wheat.

His disciples accompany Jesus in his ministry of teaching, healing, and freeing people. It is after twice feeding multitudes that Jesus asks his disciples who people say that he is and what significance they see in his actions. Peter responds, "You are the messiah, the Son of the living God."

"From that time on," Matthew's narrative turns toward

know more than the disciples in the narrative. We know God raises up Jesus from the apparent failure of his suffering and death.

In the narrative Jesus' disciples struggle each time Jesus repeats what will happen to him in Jerusalem. Jesus rebukes Peter for protesting the first prediction. Jesus' second prediction distresses the whole company of his disciples (Matthew 18.22-23).

In response to Jesus' third prediction, the mother of James and John imagines the messiah is about to inaugurate his kingdom. She believes in the warrior messiah and asks Jesus to declare that her two sons sit at his left and right. James and John pledge they can drink the cup Jesus drinks, little realizing what they promise.

Jesus' predictions invite us to reflect on the meaning of his death and resurrection as we journey with his uncomprehending disciples. The gospel writer places several teachings in Jesus' mouth that have us who follow in later generations in mind. These sayings invite us to reflect on how we take up our cross and give ourselves to Jesus' mission.



● **In what ways has giving of yourself helped you find your life?**

● **With whose suffering today do you feel and act in solidarity?**

Jesus' conversation with his disciples takes place in the district of Caesarea Philippi. Jesus is back in Israel after his trip to Tyre and Sidon where he frees a Canaanite woman's daughter from an unclean spirit. The Roman name reminds us that Jesus lives and ministers under Roman occupation.

To us today Jesus seems no political threat to the Roman state, yet his teachings then as now have political ramifications. Jesus holds the poor, the peacemakers, and the persecuted blessed (5.1-11). He teaches us to pray in the Our Father for the reign of God to come on earth (6.9-10). He identifies with the hungry and thirsty and insists what we do for the least, we do for him (25.40).

Like Jesus, Pope Francis has taken on

the religious issues of his time. An economy of exclusion kills, he writes in *Joy of the Gospel*. "How can it be that it is not news when a homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points?" (#53).

Significantly Pope Francis rode the bus in Buenos Aires. In cities people live with the poor. Daily brothers and sisters ask us for money or food, ride the bus, sleep on the train, sprawl in open spaces downtown. Pope Francis writes out of his experience of people in the barrios. He wants faithful Christians to invest in people who live in poverty.

In his exhortation *Laudato Si'* Pope Francis urges Catholics to join in repairing our common home, the Earth. Not everyone agrees. He urges actions from wearing sweaters in winter and not using air conditioning in summer to the necessity of wind and solar energy. The pope's exhortation *On Love In The Family* has also raised lively criticism as he makes room for grace in complicated family relationships.

● **What that Jesus teaches move you toward prophetic action?**

**DO SOMETHING**

**CHARITY**

**JUSTICE**

- Join or start a parish or neighborhood group to work for affordable housing in your area.
- Volunteer at school to work with programs for families.



## Betrayed by God?

Writing from exile, the Guatemalan poet Julia Esquivel evokes arresting images of God from her war-torn homeland. In her poem “Confession,” the hand of God grips her heart through an old Indian “begging for the bread of justice at the door of a locked church.” For her the tears of women mourning their sons, lovers, and fathers whom the military massacred are the tears of God.

Esquivel confesses to God the times she wanted—

*to forget forever  
the pain of the persecuted,  
the helplessness of the outcast,  
and the agony of the tortured.*

But God “conquered” and “seduced” her through the suffering bodies of the poor until God’s love “burned my heart.”

Such forceful language, taken directly from Sunday’s first reading from Jeremiah, is troubling. Like the prophet of ancient Israel, this gifted poet of Guatemala feels betrayed, even endangered by a compassion she would rather not feel. Yet at the same time she knows that the fire burning in her heart comes from God and draws her inexorably toward the anguish at the heart of God.

In our electronic age, the images of refugees, starving children, the victims of war are everywhere. It is easy to become numbed, to suffer compassion fatigue at the enormity of

suffering we look upon daily. Can we find the grace to know the anguish in our heart as the indwelling of God?

### Jeremiah feels seduced.

**O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, “Violence and destruction!”**

**For the word of the Holy One has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. If I say, “I will not mention God or speak any more in God’s name,” then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.**

Jeremiah 20:7-9

- When has God taken you beyond your zone of comfort?
- What risks have you accepted in answering God’s call to you?
- When have you recognized anguish in your heart as the indwelling of God?

## PRAY

Spend a few minutes in quiet reflection. Then briefly discuss together and identify one change each wants to make this week in light of Sunday’s readings. Pray together:

**LEADER:** God of the Exodus, God of the poor, you give us strength and courage for the journey of faith.

**ALL:** Give us all light as we discern our way together.

*Add your own intercessions.*

**LEADER:** God who raised Jesus from the dead, nourish in us the hope for a just and peaceful world.

**ALL:** Teach us to work and watch in patience for your reign. Amen.



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### The Story of Sunday by Sunday

Thirty years ago I invited sisters over to reflect on the Sunday gospels together. That circle still gathers every month. Many have joined us. Two have died. Usually at least 20 of us gather.

I started *Sunday by Sunday* with faith sharing groups like ours in mind. *Sunday by Sunday* is so easy to use most of us can take turns leading. **View the new online *Sunday by Sunday* format at [goodgroundpress.com](http://goodgroundpress.com).** Sister Joan, Editor

