

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Open a bible to John 10 and place it at the center of your group.

LEADER: Let us each place a symbol of a friendship near the bible and describe the meaning of the symbol and friendship.

Pause.

LEADER: Blessed are our friends; they know us the way we know ourselves.

ALL: In friendship life becomes abundant.

LEADER: The bonds of trust and mutual delight tie friends together.

ALL: In friendship life becomes abundant.

LEADER: Jesus no longer calls us servants.

ALL: Jesus calls us friends.

LEADER: All that Jesus has heard from his Father—

ALL: He has made known to us, his friends.

LEADER: We are not our own.

ALL: Nor are we on our own. Amen.

When Jesus talks about laying down his life freely, he expresses willingness to face suffering and death. His short public ministry has threatened officials, who want him gone. Most of us lay down our lives more slowly over decades for those we love. I keep a friend's photo on my dresser mirror to remember how she laid down hers.

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

When Sister Marian, a hospital chaplain and also a nurse, saw the MRI taken to find the reason for her persistent back pain, she knew the cancer she had survived 12 years earlier had recurred. At first the news seemed like a death sentence until the other hospital chaplains prayed with her as a circle of friends. This experience called her to life and empowered her to hope and to heal others.

Along with chemo and radiation treatments Marian continued her ministry as a chaplain and brought together people to experience the power of prayer in supporting and healing loved ones. She became a shepherd to others navigating the dark valley of serious illness, especially others struggling with cancer and their caregivers.

I took part in one of the healing services Marian held each month. It began with live soothing harp music, included a reading from scripture, and a meditation. Marian directed us to ask the



persons we came with or a person next to us what they needed and then to bless and anoint them with the oil she had put on the table.

Next to me was the doctor who did my pre-op physical in preparation for breast cancer surgery. At this service the tables were turned. I was well and she was in the middle of chemo for colon cancer. She told me about her journey and hopes to keep working to save Earth. As a scientist she wondered what we are eating and drinking that so many people have colon cancer.

I told her how kind the medical people were in the hospital on the day of my surgery and how one had covered my hands with his or hers when I joined them together over my head for a final PET scan. She told me no one was

in the room with me during a PET scan. I was awestruck.

Whose hand in that vulnerable moment gave so much support? Was it my mother who died when I was 24? We smeared each other's hands with oil and prayed for each other. I left blessed, anointed, and heartened.

Both Marian and my doctor have gone to God. Both lived their healing vocations to the end and left many of us stronger. This is how they laid down their lives and helped me see God's hand in my own life.

● **When have you received healing and strength from someone else? When have you given them to another?**



GOSPEL

Jesus lays down his life for his friends.



JESUS 1: I am the good shepherd. Good shepherds lay down their lives for the sheep. Hired hands, who are not really shepherds and to whom the sheep do not belong, catch sight of a wolf coming, forsake the sheep, and run away; then the wolf can snatch and scatter the sheep.

ALL: Hired hands run off because they work for pay and don't care about the sheep.

JESUS 2: I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep, and mine know me, just as the Father knows me

and I know the Father. I lay down my life for the sheep.

JESUS 3: I have other sheep not of this fold. I must lead them, too, and they shall hear my voice. There will be one flock and one shepherd.

JESUS 4: The Father loves me for this: that I lay down my life to take it up again. No one takes it from me; I lay it down freely. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.

John 10.11-18

Jesus is a model leader.

Good shepherds accompany their sheep night and day, spend their lives finding pasture and water, and lay down their lives to protect them if need be. The whole of chapter 10 in John's gospel uses the image of a good shepherd to explore our relationship as believers with Jesus, who lived out his love for us unto death.

The image of Jesus as the good shepherd is beloved among Christians, one we return to each year in the Sunday gospels of Easter. It's an image of belonging and intimacy. Shepherds know their sheep, and sheep recognize their shepherds' voices. Shepherds lead their flocks in and out of sheepfolds

by calling them. Sheep will not follow another shepherd's voice.

The scriptures of Israel frequently use shepherding as an image of God's care for the people. God is the shepherd of Psalm 23. For early Christians and for us, the shepherd image expresses closeness and intimacy with Jesus. The verses in Sunday's gospel emphasize the wholehearted love Jesus demonstrates in loving us unto death. Three times the short gospel passage repeats what makes a shepherd good—willingness to lay down one's life for the sheep.

Jesus is speaking to several Pharisees in this chapter. Like Jesus the Pharisees are

teachers of the people in the villages. The Pharisees enter the narrative to check whether the man who received his sight in the previous chapter was really blind.

When Jesus contrasts good shepherds with hired hands, he is asking these teachers to consider which they are. The contrast also asks us which we are.

- What appeals to you about the image of Jesus as the good shepherd?
- Who knows your voice? Whose voices do you know and hear?
- Who do you shepherd? For whom are you laying down your life?

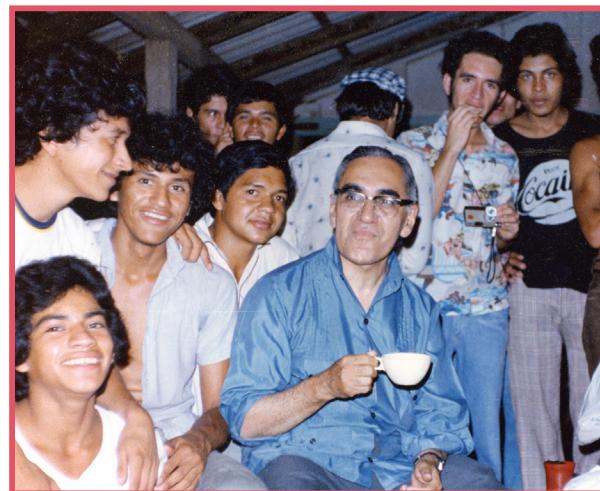
John's gospel invites the Pharisees not only to assess their faithfulness to God's people but to recognize and affirm Jesus' divinity. In the Old Testament God is the shepherd of Israel. Identifying Jesus with this image of God expresses his divinity.

Twice in Sunday's gospel Jesus insists, "I am the good shepherd." This is one of several *I Am* statements that

Pope Francis has encouraged the process of beatification for Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador. As a good shepherd, Romero knew the people he served, especially the poor, and preached to end the violence against them in El Salvador, putting his own life at risk.

links Israel's God, *I Am Who Am*, with Jesus. From its first verses John's gospel identifies Jesus as the pre-existent Word who was with God from the beginning and was God and who became flesh to dwell among us. Jesus is God incarnate. For Jews who don't believe in Jesus this is blasphemy.

The Christians of the late first century hear in Jesus' conflicts with the Pharisees tensions in their time with Jews who don't believe in Jesus. For Christian Jews, faith in Jesus continues faith in Israel's God. For other Jews, only God is the shepherd of Israel. Until the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, Jesus' followers and other Jews worshiped there together. Afterward they slowly grew apart into two religious faiths.



The three verses that follow Sunday's gospel tell us that the Pharisees who have listened to the parable of the good shepherd are divided in their response (19.19-21). Some insist Jesus has a demon and is crazy. Others are moving toward faith in Jesus.

- What tensions do you experience with people of other religious faiths?

In the *Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis challenges us today to be evangelizing communities, to get "involved by word and deed in people's daily lives." Jesus knelt and washed his disciples' feet, the pope reminds us, and invited his disciples to do the same.

Similarly an evangelizing community "embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others. Evangelizers thus take on the 'smell of the sheep' and the sheep are willing to hear their voice." An evangelizing community stands "by people at every step of the way, no matter how difficult or lengthy this may prove to be" (#24).

- Whose suffering do you and your community touch?

DO SOMETHING

CHARITY **JUSTICE**

- How green are the pastures and clean the waters in your area? Who in your city or region experiences pollutants in their drinking water, soil, or air? With what groups can you collaborate to clean the air, insure water safe to drink, and grow food safe to eat?
- Find Pope Francis's exhortation *Laudato Si'* online. Read chapter one about problems in our world environment that need care.

Where is salvation?

The early Christian communities do not yet have the New Testament. When the first Christians gather to pray and worship, they continue to read the scriptures of Israel. As they listen to these scriptures, they find images such as the shepherd in the gospel and the cornerstone in this first reading that help them articulate who Jesus is.

Luke wants his readers to see that Jesus' disciples continue his work. In Sunday's first reading Peter addresses Jewish leaders and elders in much the same way Jesus in the parable of the good shepherd addresses the Pharisees. Peter and John cure a man, lame from birth, who is begging alms at the temple gate. For that and because they are proclaiming Jesus' resurrection, the priests, the captain of the temple guard, and the Sadducees arrest and jail them.

When the leaders of the Sanhedrin ask, "By what power or by what name have you done this?" Peter answers that it is in the name of Jesus, whom they crucified and whom God raised from the dead. He tells his interrogators that, although they have rejected him, Jesus is the only source of salvation in the whole world.

Like Jesus, Peter and John take care of the sick and weak. Like Jesus, these shepherd leaders challenge established leaders and provoke their wrath. Undeterred, the apostles stubbornly assert their faith in Jesus' resurrection from the dead and its life-giving, curative power.

Continuing Jesus' mission is our call, too. Covid 19 has opened our eyes to how many people serve as good shepherds in our lives, some on the front lines in health care and some in the hidden work of the good care, people from doctors and nurses, to grocers to garbage collectors. Similarly many people today lead as shepherds in struggles for safe policing, fair housing, food security.

Peter proclaims Jesus' saving power.

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.' There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

Acts 4:8-12

- What characterizes a community of which Jesus is the cornerstone?
- What wholeness does the human community need? What does your faith ask you to contribute to the common good?

PRAY

LEADER: Let us stand side by side as friends do.

ALL: We are not our own, nor are we on our own.

LEADER: Let us pray for one another as friends do.

Each can offer prayers and blessing for people they love.

LEADER: Beloved, we are God's children now.

ALL: What we will be has not yet been revealed.



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.

ONLINE RETREATS

Visit goodgroundpress.com to find an online retreat. These easy-to-use reflections give you time with God each day. As spring bursts into new life, nourish the new life of Easter within you.