

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Place a bible open to Mark 6 and a lighted candle at the center of your group.

LEADER: Christ Jesus breaks down the barrier of hostility that keeps us apart.

ALL: Christ Jesus is our peace.

LEADER: In Jesus Jews and Gentiles become one body.

ALL: In his Spirit may we cross the barriers that separate us by race, by religion, by bank account, by gender, by anger.

LEADER: Let us welcome in one another the gospel each of us seeks to live as Jesus' disciples.

ALL: Let us welcome the word Jesus speaks to us. Amen.

When Jesus sees the vast crowd following him in Sunday's gospel, "His heart was moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd." Pity affects one in the gut; it's visceral. When we pity, someone else's suffering echoes in our nervous systems. The similar word *compassion* means to *feel* with.

Ellie Roscher has promoted the Kibera Girls Soccer Academy since she taught young women like them in high school in the U.S. and students from the two schools connected. "I'm not a huge fan of pity," Ellie writes. "It can make the person who is feeling pity superior in some way to the person being pitied. If pity leads to compassion and action,

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it can become a productive emotion. In Sunday's gospel Jesus does not feel pity for the crowd and then turn away. 'He teaches them things.'"

At the time Ellie is writing from the Kibera Girls Soccer Academy (KGSA) in Kenya. A teacher herself, Ellie and her Catholic high school have helped raise funds for KGSA. Its founder Abdul Kassim and students live in Kibera, the largest slum in Kenya near Nairobi. The school started with one table, one textbook, and rented chairs. Today a two-story building houses four classrooms, a science lab, and a library filled with computers and books. The school educates 130 girls for free.

"It would be easy, walking through this garbage-filled slum, hearing stories

of girls being orphaned, of parents with HIV or malaria, to pity them," Ellie continues. "Many are sheep without a shepherd. One girl left her family in rural Kenya to go to school and lives alone. Another lives with an aunt because her parents have passed away. The girls understand that an education will raise them and their families out of poverty.

"In spending time with these hard-working young women, I find they have no room for pity. They seek out teachers, mentors, and knowledge to change their lot in life. They inspire me as they talk about claiming their right to education; they move me to work for more access to education for young people around the world, including the U.S."

● When has pity or compassion moved you to action?

Sunday Readings:

Jeremiah 23.1-6

Ephesians 2.13-18

Mark 6.30-34

GOSPEL



The twelve return and report to Jesus.

NARRATOR: When they returned, the apostles gathered around Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught.

JESUS: Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.

NARRATOR: People were coming and going in great numbers, making it impossible for them to so much as eat. Jesus and the

apostles went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. People saw them leaving and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, Jesus saw a great crowd. He had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. He began to teach them many things.

Mark 6.30-34

Jesus calls us beyond fear to faith.

The lectionary organizes our hearing of the gospels in short snippets. In this Sunday's snippet the twelve return from a mission that Jesus sent them out to do in last Sunday's snippet (Mark 6.7-13). They come back woofed but Jesus' growing popularity prevents them from taking time to eat or rest, let alone debrief.

The gospel writer Mark likes to create literary sandwiches, a story within a story. As in a sandwich this literary technique makes the story in the middle the meat for interpreting the whole. The sandwich in Mark 6 looks like this:

6.7-13 sending the twelve,

6.14-29 John the Baptist's death,

6.30-34 return of the twelve.

Last Sunday the lectionary served us the first slice of story—Jesus sending out the twelve in pairs; this Sunday we hear the second slice of story—the return of the twelve. The key to interpreting the whole lies in the omitted verses, the account of John the Baptist's senseless and gruesome beheading.

Why tell the Baptist's story between the twelve going out to continue Jesus' mission and their return? Like Mark's audience in A.D. 70, we readers know that the twelve take up the mission that has cost both the Baptist and Jesus their lives.

John the Baptist precedes and prepares for Jesus' ministry. Mark's gospel begins with John the Baptist's preaching (1.2-8). Jesus only begins preaching in Galilee after Herod arrests

John. The gospel pictures crowds coming from all over Israel to hear Jesus' teaching and seek his healing.

The missing 17 verses tell us that Jesus' ministry has stirred up people in Galilee. They think Elijah or another prophet has returned. King Herod worries that Jesus is John the Baptist raised from the dead.

In Mark's plot, telling the story of John's beheading does more than supply time for the twelve to be away. More importantly, John's senseless death at the whimsy of a drunken king foreshadows the cost of prophetic ministry. What happens to John the Baptist may happen to Jesus and the disciples who follow him. Jesus' disciples and those Mark's gospel calls to faith have reason to fear for their lives.

● How does the missing middle of Mark's literary sandwich affect your sense of the gospel?

● What questions does the literary sandwich raise for you?

Crowds follow Jesus' disciples back to Jesus, who cannot shut off his compassion. People's hunger for his teaching and healing keeps swelling.

Mark writes 40 years after Jesus' public ministry and his disciples' first mission. By A.D. 70 when Mark writes, Jesus' apostles have spread the good news of his resurrection from the dead around the Mediterranean Sea. What

concerns the gospel writer is who will continue the mission Jesus began and his disciples spread.

The disciples Jesus sends on mission in the gospel story have in history grown old or been martyred by the time Mark writes. Peter and Paul were martyred in A.D. 64 and 66, James earlier.

Who will continue the work Jesus began? Who will follow the disciples that have given their lives to spreading his message—Peter, James, John, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and Salome? Mark writes to call forth new disciples.

● What is a way you continue Jesus' mission in your family life?

Sunday's gospel passage belongs to a larger literary whole that begins with Jesus' disciples fearing for their lives as they try to cross the Sea of Galilee in a storm (4.35-41). Jesus calms the storm; they respond in awe, "Who is this that the wind and sea obey him?" This literary whole ends with the disciples again trying to cross the Sea of Galilee, this time rowing against a wind



(6.45-52). Jesus walks to them on the water, calms the winds, and terrifies them.

In both stories Jesus' disciples move from fear to awe but not to faith. Mark wants us hearers to experience these threshold moments of awe in the lives of Jesus' first disciples.

Mark anticipates his audience in A.D. 70 may feel the same fear, confusion, and bewilderment that Jesus' first disciples felt as they followed him before his death and resurrection. Mark doesn't picture James, Peter, and Andrew as the heroic martyrs they became in their years as apostles. In the gospel Mark repeatedly brings them to moments of awe that call them and us to faith.

Mark's audience knows Jesus' initially fearful and

bumbling disciples later become great leaders. Whether Mark writes closer to the terrible persecution of Christians in Rome under the deranged emperor Nero (A.D. 64) or in the aftermath of the Roman war against Judea (A.D. 66-73), the prospect that Christians might be persecuted, even put to death, has become a grim reality. Faith may cost everything as Jesus says later in Mark's gospel, "Let those who want to become my followers deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me" (8.34).

The first disciples' failures in Mark's gospel invite his hearers to accept their own fear, terror, and confusion as part of faith developing and transforming us. Christians who have struggled and suffered in the name of justice have learned this lesson.

● When have you stood up for something or someone despite fear?

● How have you grown through giving yourself to others?

● How do the failures of Jesus' first disciples encourage you?

Pope Francis calls us all to become evangelizers. To evangelize is to introduce Jesus to people who know nothing about him. For Pope Francis in the *Joy of the Gospel*, "The primary reason for evangelizing is the love of Jesus which we have received, the experience of salvation which urges us to ever greater love of him. ...If we do not feel an intense desire to share this love,

DO SOMETHING

CHARITY

JUSTICE

- Practice welcoming Sabbath. Restore your hard-working, productive self to praise of God's glory. Take time to read the bible or a book of spirituality as the first act of waking to the day.
- Thank God for ten blessings each morning as you have a first cup of coffee.

we need to pray insistently that he will once more touch our heart” (264).

“It is impossible to persevere in a fervent evangelization unless we are convinced from personal experience that it is not the same thing to have known Jesus as not to have known him, not the same thing to walk with him as to walk blindly, not the same thing to hear his word as not to know it, and not the same thing to contemplate him, to worship him, to find our peace in him, as not to. It is not the same thing to try to build the world with his gospel as to try to do so by our own lights” (266).

● How has knowing Jesus made your life different?

● Who have you introduced to Jesus?



Opt for the poor.

Shepherds lead their flocks, find them pasture, and keep them safe—an image the prophet Jeremiah uses in Sunday’s first reading to criticize Israel’s faithless leaders. Jeremiah delivers harsh warnings but keeps faith that God is the ultimate shepherd of Israel and will one day raise up a righteous leader.

God calls Jeremiah to suffer with his people through the years leading up to the destruction of the temple and city of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. The people of Jeremiah’s time consider

the temple indestructible. They remember that a hundred years earlier when the Assyrians defeated the northern tribes of Israel, the armies besieged Jerusalem but miraculously retreated.

Few want to hear Jeremiah’s glum warnings. The prophet repeatedly criticizes the kings for failing to keep Israel’s covenant with God and instead making military alliances that involve worshiping the gods of their allies. Instead of keeping the flock together, the kings let the people scatter to the worship of other gods. In addition they neglect the poor.

Jeremiah often acts out his prophecies. He wears a yoke to demonstrate Israel will serve the Babylonians. He smashes pottery to show what its enemies will do to the kingdom. At the same time Jeremiah also promises God will tend the flock the Babylonians are about to destroy. God will gather the remnant of the people scattered to other lands and bring them home.

God’s just shepherd

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Holy One. Therefore thus says the Holy One, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them.

So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Holy One. Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of

all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Holy One.

The days are surely coming, says the Holy One, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: “The Holy One is our righteousness.”

Jeremiah 23.1-6

● What work for justice might you lead in your family or in your parish or local community?

● What hope do you have for leaders in our Church?

PRAY

Pray together in the spirit of Sunday’s second reading, Ephesians 2.13-18.

LEADER: Jesus, you invite us to continue your prophetic ministry today.

ALL: You are our peace.

LEADER: Jesus, you broke down the hostility between Jews and Gentiles.

ALL: May we build your peace in our families and our world.

Exchange a sign of peace.



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.