

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

**P**lace an open bible at the center of your group. Place a loaf of sweet bread beside it. Pray together.

**LEADER:** Let us recognize who feeds us, who sets Wisdom's table in creation, who nourishes our spirits, who gives us our lives.

**ALL:** We taste and see the goodness of God in peach and plum, bean and potato.

**LEADER:** Let us open our hearts to God's nourishing word.

**ALL:** Let us chew on all it asks of us. Amen.

**F**or the Jews in Sunday's gospel Jesus is way out of line when he identifies himself as bread come down from heaven. They murmur and question how he can say such things.

My mother and I murmured and questioned each other for a long time. Her murmuring against me began when I started going to daily Mass during Lent when I was sixteen. She didn't like it. She preferred that I stayed home to make sure the rest of the kids got off to school because she left early every morning to teach in a country school ten miles away.

When I wanted to enter the Sisters of St. Joseph after my first year of college, she dismissed her school for a day and came to register me at the more secular University of Minnesota. She didn't want me

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# SUNDAY

## by SUNDAY



Mother, me, Aunt Margaret

to waste my life. I murmured against her that she didn't care what I wanted. We agreed that day that I would finish college before making any life decisions.

Like the Jewish Christians for whom John writes, my mother and I lived in an era of sharp boundaries between Protestants and Catholics. Our own family table was a place of division. Raised Methodist, Mother had many anti-Catholic prejudices. She worried that voting for a Catholic president would put the Vatican in power. She murmured every Friday about having to cook fish.

**H**er dad, who lived with us, liked neither fish nor Catholics (nor the Yankees). Mother forbade us

to make the Sign of the Cross and say the Catholic meal prayer at her table—probably to keep peace with Grandpa. For the years of my growing up, Mother went neither to her own church or to ours. She just didn't go.

When I still wanted to enter the sisters after I graduated from college, she didn't stand in my way. To her, my decision was an unspeakable grief. Slowly we lived into some understanding. I learned her objections came out of the deepest love for me. She learned more appreciation of the sisters.

When her father died and she got sick, mother decided to join the Catholic Church with the rest of us. She asked me questions about Catholic belief in her letters,

and I answered with fervent reflections. But the cloister separated me from the family. Not until my younger sister Jan's baccalaureate Mass at the College of St. Catherine did mother and I worship together for the only time and celebrate the end of our long antagonism.

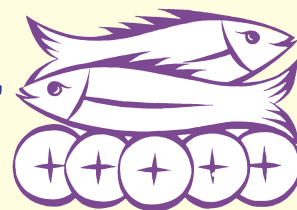
It was never Jesus as lord and savior who attracted my life commitment; it was the Jesus of Sunday's gospel, the bread of life, the one who gathers us at his table, gives himself for the life of the world, and promises eternal life to those who eat this bread.

● With whom have you murmured?

● What is the value of holding differences in tension?

# GOSPEL

## Jesus is bread for the world.



**NARRATOR:** The Jews began to murmur about Jesus because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven."

**PEOPLE:** Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, "I have come down from heaven?"

**JESUS:** Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, "And they shall all be taught by God." Everyone who has heard and

learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father.

Very truly, I tell you whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.

John 6.41-51

## Who believes Jesus is the bread come down from heaven?

John's discourse on the bread of life in chapter six is 72 verses long. The chapter begins with Jesus' multiplying five loaves and two fish to feed 5,000 people—a sign which reveals Jesus' identity as wisdom's child, the giver of abundant life, the messiah. Two Sundays ago this sign story began the Church's reading of John 6.

As the chapter unfolds, Jesus engages in conversations with three different groups—his disciples, the crowd, and the group John calls "the Jews." Jesus speaks first and last to his disciples, challenging them to feed the crowd as the chapter

begins and asking them for a confession of faith that his flesh and blood are real food as the chapter ends.

The crowd is a swing group in the drama of the chapter. They want to make Jesus king when he feeds them, but they want another sign the next day before they will believe he is the real bread from heaven.

Within the crowd is the group John calls "the Jews." They don't believe Jesus is the messiah. They question how Jesus can be from heaven when they know his origins on earth. This exchange reflects sharpening differences between the community of Christian Jews for whom John

writes in the A.D. 90s and the Jews who follow other rabbis.

Both Jews who follow Jesus and Jews who follow Moses are children of the same parent religion. Both groups inherit Israel's scriptural traditions. Jewish scholars don't find evidence in the Talmud that first-century rabbis officially read Christian Jews out of their synagogues.

However, local groups may have magnified differences and sharpened boundaries just as before Vatican II Catholics bought only from Catholics. Vatican II eased such tensions with its emphasis on ecumenism. Abortion continues to create cultural fault lines politically as does gun safety.

● **What issues polarize Christians today?**

● **What once-alienating differences no longer matter?**

**M**urmuring intensifies into open conflict in Sunday's gospel. *Murmuring* is the same word the book of Exodus uses to name ancient Israel's complaining against Moses and against God for bringing them into the desert without food and water. Their murmuring reflects a testing of their faith in the God who leads them.

Jesus' claim to be the bread that came down from heaven sets the Jews murmuring. His claim tests their faith. Is God's revelation only in the law of Moses and the God who supplied Israel quail and manna in the wilderness, or is God's revelation in their midst in Jesus?

Jesus' claim invites faith in him. The Jews counter with fact. They know Jesus is the son of Joseph. They know his mother and father.

All three groups in this chapter miss the point about

Jesus. His disciples doubt their resources to feed the crowd. The crowd mistakes Jesus for a popular pork-barrel hero. "The Jews" openly disbelieve his claims that he, rather than the manna in the desert, is the real bread of life from God.

● **Where do you best fit—among the doubting disciples, the fair-weather crowd, or the Jews faithful to Moses' law and the past?**

● **Imagine yourself as one of the Jews, a sincere believer who keeps the law of Moses. What reasons do you have for disbelieving Jesus' claims?**

**T**o contest the murmurers, Jesus argues that the revelation of God in Israel's holy history and law ought to lead real believers to recognize God at work in him. Then Jesus escalates the conflict. He contrasts himself with manna. Israel's ancestors ate manna in the wilderness and died. Those who eat the bread that comes down from heaven, namely Jesus, will not die.



A double meaning emerges in the conversation. When Jesus speaks of himself as the living bread, he invites faith not only in himself but in his eucharistic presence in the continuing Christian communities. The bread he gives in every eucharist is his flesh for the life of the world.

● **How eucharist-centered is your faith?**

● **Where or in whom do you find Jesus really present? People? Sacraments? Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament? Scripture?**



**Cretin Derham Hall High School in St. Paul, Minnesota, raises money for Heifer International with an Empty Bowl project of making bowls and selling soup. Together they have filled many arks with animals for families in developing countries and people in need in the U.S. Plan to do the Empty Bowls project in your parish, group, or community center. Visit Empty Bowls online. Many cities describe their local programs. Or, fundraise for Bread for the World, or Feeding America. Involve families.**



## God provides for a despairing Elijah.

**T**he Elijah cycle of stories begins with the prophet announcing a drought in the northern kingdom of Israel, ruled by Ahab from the capital city of Samaria. Elijah's prophecy in 1 Kings 17.1 that Israel will have no rain unless God says so makes him *persona non grata* in the kingdom. He flees Israel to live with a widow and her son near Sidon. Ravens feed him on the way to her house.

After three years, God sends Elijah back to Israel, where he learns Queen Jezebel has killed all of God's prophets. He is the only remaining prophet of God in Israel.

When Ahab sees Elijah, he calls him the troubler of Israel. Elijah maintains that Ahab and his royal house are the real troublemakers of Israel because they do not keep the commandments of the covenant. He arranges a duel between himself and the prophets of Baal, the Canaanite god whom Jezebel has brought to Samaria, to see whose God will bring rain.

Elijah wins the duel, and God sends rain. But the prophet must run for his life to escape the vengeance of Jezebel. Sunday's first reading finds Elijah in despair. He has gone as far as he can go. God tenderly cares for him when he can no longer carry on God's work.

The food the angel of God brings to Elijah strengthens him to travel from northern Israel to Mount Sinai on the point of the Sinai Peninsula. There the despairing Elijah meets God in the silence after wind, rain, lightning, and storm and ultimately returns to the north as God's conscience.

### Angels feed Elijah.

**Elijah went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die. "It is enough, now, O God; take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors."**

**Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again.**

**The angel of the Holy One came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you."**

**Elijah got up, ate, and drank. Then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God.**

**1 Kings 19.4-8**

● **When have you, like Elijah, felt exhausted by God's work and despairing of its lasting worth?**

● **What nourishes your faith and work to carry on Jesus' mission?**

## PRAY

Conclude your reflection on the bread of life by sharing from the loaf you have placed at the center of your group.

**LEADER:** Let us remember and say to one another the nourishment and blessing we are to one another.

**ALL:** Bless each of us in our efforts to bless others.

*In turn, break off a piece of bread from the loaf and give it to the person next to you with a blessing that they continue to nourish others in a way they nourish you.*

**SING:** Praise God from whom all blessings flow.  
Our songs rise up from earth below.  
We praise your goodness without end.  
Creator, Christ, and Spirit friend.

*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.

CHARITY

JUSTICE

DO SOMETHING

● Go outside your familiar circle by visiting a synagogue or mosque. Invite neighbors of other faiths to teach you about how they practice their faith.