

# SUNDAY

## by SUNDAY

Patricia D. Nanoff

Place a lighted candle beside a bible open to John 6.

**LEADER:** We have come to believe Jesus is the Holy One of God.

**ALL:** He has words of eternal life.

**LEADER:** We belong to the company of Jesus' followers.

**ALL:** To whom else shall we go?

**LEADER:** We are a community of equals, women and men, committed to mutual love.

**ALL:** We share one Spirit, one faith.

**LEADER:** We eat together at Wisdom's table.

**ALL:** We share the fruits of creation.

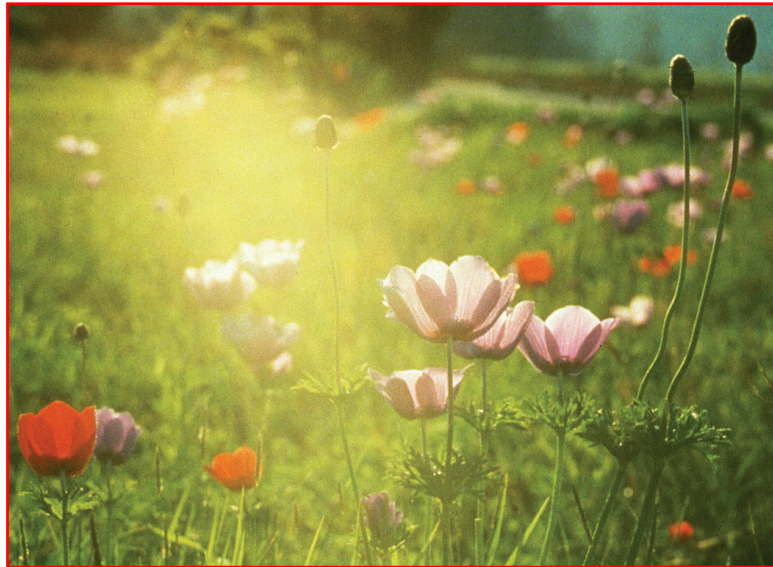
**LEADER:** We eat together at the table of Wisdom's child.

**ALL:** We eat together at the table of Wisdom's child.

**LEADER:** We seek the wisdom to recognize what we can and cannot change.

**ALL:** Jesus has words of eternal life.

A friend of mine got arrested recently. She was already on probation for a previous drunk-driving offense. We met because of her dog. What happens to the dog when the owner's life spirals out of control?



Weeping may linger for the night, but with the dawn rejoicing.

Psalm 30, verse 5

My husband and I had planned to care for her dog while she was in rehab. When we got the call that she was in jail, we wondered if she would make it to rehab or go directly to the county workhouse. When we finally connected by telephone, a collect call from the county jail, she told me how scared and hopeless she felt. We talked about the unique miracle that is sobriety. She was terrified she would return to her old ways and never be able to live up to the demands of a sober life.

As a therapist and researcher, I have spent a lot of time in the company of recovering alcoholic women. I am no stranger to the catastrophic events that can lead to a more beautiful sober life.

As my friend navigated the territory between addiction

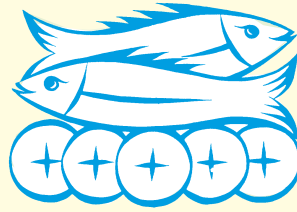
and recovery, I found myself reflecting on the ragged edges of life when poor choices interrupt it. I must admit that I have not managed to avoid these situations.

When I find myself on the cusp of something new and promising and recognize that transformation requires a willingness to live into the promise by changing an essential attitude or behavior, I have been known to stop dead in my tracks. I hesitate at the edge of the new, fearful about making the leap from ordinary to extraordinary.

The disciples at the beginning of Sunday's gospel face such a choice. Will they stay on with Jesus or turn away as the crowds already have?

● When have you hesitated to make a transforming change?

# GOSPEL



## Jesus has the words of eternal life.

**NARRATOR:** Many of his disciples were listening to Jesus' teaching.

**DISCIPLES:** This teaching is difficult. How can anyone take it seriously?

**NARRATOR:** Jesus knew that his disciples were complaining.

**JESUS:** Does this shock you? What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life, while the flesh is of no avail. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe.

**NARRATOR:** Jesus knew from the beginning the ones who would not believe and the one who would betray him.

**JESUS:** For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.

**NARRATOR:** As a result of this, many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. Jesus then said to the Twelve:

**JESUS:** Do you also want to leave?

**SIMON PETER:** Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God.

John 6.60-69

## To whom can we go? Jesus has words of eternal life.

John's gospel introduces us to the world of allegory. Nothing is as it first appears. In John's gospel individual passages require a long view. Ordinary bread and wine become Jesus' flesh and blood, his continuing presence among us. Everyday experiences become evidence of the Spirit of God moving through our relationships and encounters.

This gospel is pure poetry. It reveals the Christ-light in the interplay between signs and dialogues. The sign of the multiplication of the loaves sets off 47 verses of dialogue that reflect on its meaning. Jesus is

the bread of life, the bread that comes down from heaven, greater than the manna God sent Israel in the desert. Whoever eats this bread will live forever.

The ordinary sign of bread points to Christ's extraordinary presence throughout history—from incarnation to resurrection to life everlasting. In the rich tapestry of John's gospel, individual story threads hint at a larger context and one passage can fail to make sense without consulting the whole.

Here the gospel resonates with our individual lives. The gospel writer does not intend individual episodes to stand alone

any more than one choice can communicate the full meaning of my life.

● How would you tell your story if today were the only day to tell about?

● What is the fuller story of your life so far?

On this Sunday in Ordinary Time Jesus' disciples react to the jarring paradox in Jesus' difficult and extraordinary teaching in last Sunday's gospel—"Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life and I will raise them up on the last day." Their reaction invites us into the dizzying experience of realizing that, like them, we have taken Jesus' words too literally.

In this conflict we see the relationship between our old lives and the promise of new life, between ordinary and extraordinary. Jesus does not offer ordinary bread and wine, but rather the transforming experience of entering into new life with him. I find myself standing in the company of the disciples, wondering how I can even begin to comprehend what this really means?

Sunday's gospel passage tells us that Jesus alone holds the power to work such an extraordinary transformation in us. Yet, standing fully in the world of the ordinary, the disciples cannot enter into this new reality. They stand in ordinary time and grumble.

The teaching is too difficult, too unlikely, too unbelievable. Jesus challenges them by asking if they would believe if the lesson were more dramatic, like ascending to heaven?

Hearing this, some disciples realize they just aren't getting it. The gospel tells us that they returned to their old ways.

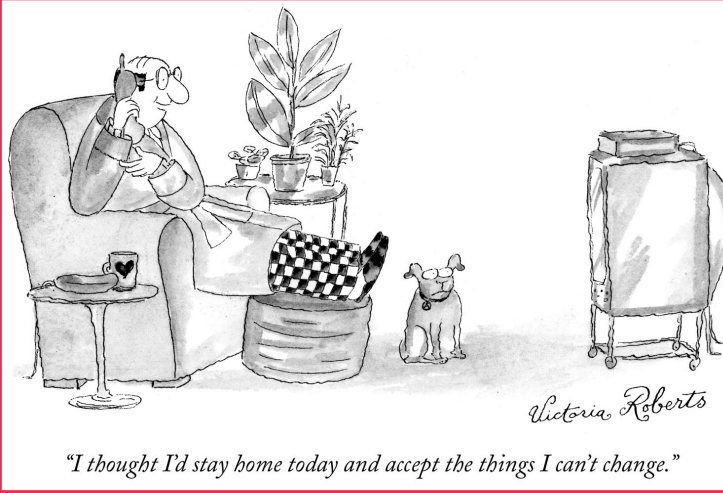
I must admit that I understand that choice. I wish I could claim that I haven't cringed from a lesson too harsh to be learned. I prefer my transformations more mundane.

● **What do you find dizzying or jarring in Jesus' teaching?**

● **What has helped you cling to rather than cringe from a transforming vision of yourself?**

**T**he most dramatic changes in my own life have resulted from the sometimes bruising encounters with people who love me. We live in the dynamic tension between what is asked and what we are able to do on our own power and initiative. Isn't this the baffling miracle of Eucharistic presence?

Jesus is unrelenting, asking the remaining disciples if they plan to wander off, too. Simon Peter responds with a nearly



archetypal response: "To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God."

We have come to believe, Peter says, even though the claim seems preposterous. The disciples can no longer live in the neat confines of their ordinary lives. If they are to remain on the journey, they must live as though they can comprehend the mystery of redemption found in the Eucharistic gift.

**I** am still doing dog-duty for my friend. She is in treatment and has found a calm place in the storm of her difficult life. She is finally able to consider the truth of her life choices without the harsh

light of her self-hate as a companion. She is coming to believe that her life means more than wasted days and wasted opportunities. She is seeing a Divine reality in her sober relationships.

She has found the peace that emerges when we are desperate or challenged or afraid and find we have nowhere to go except forward.

To whom shall we go? Jesus has the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that he is the Holy One of God.

● **How do you understand the mystery of the Eucharist?**

### FIRST READING

## Whom will you serve?

**I**n Sunday's first reading Joshua challenges the people of Israel, "If it does not please you to serve the Holy One, decide today whom you will serve." Joshua makes this challenge at the grand ceremonial gathering to reaffirm the covenant between God and God's people in which the book of Joshua culminates. Joshua's challenge puts the question of God's prominence in our lives front and center. Who we will serve? Do we attend to divine or worldly matters?

**DO SOMETHING**

**CHARITY** **JUSTICE**

- Visit Network, the Catholic social justice lobby, to explore legislative policies that help mend the wealth and income gap. Learn about the impact of the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit on families living near or below the poverty line. Explore conversations about what living wages should include, so that their income can sustain people who work.

I can make some stray worry or bad habit the centerpiece of my life. This rarely leads to good. Bob Dylan sings, "You have to serve somebody sometime." In moments when my beloved relationships call me back to reality, I find that I cannot serve God well when I am also in service to the god of my own plans and desires!

I find myself nudged into changing when I encounter some idea or habit that has become a kind of god for me. Commentaries on the book of Joshua suggest that for Joshua and the assembled tribes, the law was not something constructed by humankind, rather, it was God's own handprint on the world of the ordinary. The law is a living and sacred reality within our everyday lives.

Thinking of God's law in this way raises the question of obedience. Whom will I serve? What order do I embrace when I attempt to impose my own will on events, people, experiences? How much control do I really have over that amazing river of creative spirit which I find in my everyday life?

The people of Israel put away their gods and renew the covenant. They see their lives from deep within the context of God's eternal, everyday presence among them. This reality motivates their faith commitment. "Far be it from us to forsake the Holy One," they say. Would that I am so wise! Would that I can follow their example!

## Joshua prepares to die.

Joshua gathered together all the tribes of Israel at Shechem, summoning their elders, their leaders, their judges, and their officers. When they stood in ranks before God, Joshua addressed all the people.

"Thus says the Holy One, the God of Israel: In times past your ancestors dwelt beyond the river and served other gods. If it does not please you to serve God, decide today whom you will serve, the god your ancestors served beyond the river or the gods of the Amorites in whose country you are dwelling. As for me and my household, we will serve the Holy One."

But the people answered, "Far be it from us to forsake the Holy One for the service of other gods. For it was the Holy One, our God, who brought us and our ancestors up out of the land of Egypt, out of a state of slavery. God performed those great miracles before our very eyes and protected us along our entire journey and among all the peoples through whom we passed. Therefore, we will serve the Holy One."

Joshua 24.1-2,15-17,18

- How much control do you want over the amazing river of creative spirit in your everyday life?
- How much control do you have?

### Time to Renew

Renew your *Sunday by Sunday* online. A new subscription year begins October 3. Call us at 800-232-5533 if you have not already renewed. Thank you.

# PRAY

Renew your choice to believe Jesus is the bread of life and the wisdom of God.

**LEADER 1:** Wisdom, planted deep within us, you understand our every action; you hold and sustain us in the world of your delight.

**ALL:** Giver of life and hope, we praise you.

**LEADER 2:** Provider of food in every season, real nourisher of our human hungers.

**ALL:** Giver of life and hope, we praise you.

**LEADER 3:** The Word who was with God and the Wisdom that was from the beginning is with us.

**ALL:** Giver of life and hope, we praise you.

**LEADER 4:** Bread of life, you call us to your feast to make your words of eternal life our own.

**ALL:** Giver of life and hope, we praise you.

**LEADER 5:** When we eat the bread that is Jesus' real food and drink the wine that is Jesus' real life blood, may our acts make us a community of love and life where all can thrive.

**ALL:** Giver of life and hope, we praise you.

Share a greeting of peace.

Patricia D. Nanoff, holds a Doctor of Ministry degree from United Theological Seminary and is a licensed social worker. Her book *Rising from the Dead: Stories of Women's Spiritual Journeys to Sobriety (2007)* is available from Haworth Press.

