

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

by Patricia D. Nanoff

Open a bible and light a candle beside it. Share with one another your own experiences of those who have taught and modeled for you standards and styles of greatness. Then pray the gathering prayer together.

LEADER: God of all greatness, help us to recognize and to welcome you in all those who struggle or who are vulnerable, little, or disenfranchised in any way.

ALL: Show us the way to greatness in the daily gentleness and generosity with which we do justice, love tenderly, and walk humbly with you and with your chosen ones. Amen.

I taught students working toward two-year, health care degrees for many years. Health care is familiar territory to me, yet when my father moved into a nursing home after suffering his third stroke, I found myself in a landscape bleak and unfamiliar.

Dad exhausted his resources quickly and needed county assistance to remain in a facility. His county-funded bed in an unbeautiful little nursing home on a busy street in a first ring suburb had seen better days.



My sister called it Crestfallen Acres.

The help my father needed with personal tasks insulted his sense of privacy. Wheelchair bound, he spoke and swallowed with difficulty. Reading was impossible without assistance from a family member or friend. He became increasingly dependent on my mother for emotional support. Then she died, and I took over her habit of daily visits.

One evening as I reached Dad's room, his nurse was there on her evening rounds. She knelt next to his wheelchair, held his hand, leaned in, and spoke softly. The harsh

overhead lights had been switched off; his reading lamp lighted their conversation. She looked like a guardian angel, inquiring about every bruise and sore spot.

My father leaned toward her and gave her his full attention, answering clearly and with a serenity

he rarely showed to us. This healing encounter completely enveloped him.

The nurse had not seen me. She was making her day longer and more arduous by taking this time simply to be with her patient. I witnessed the care so critical to my father's well being in better hands than mine. Standing at the doorway to my father's last days, I glimpsed a moment of sacred presence within the harsh landscape of sickness and loss—a blessing beyond speaking.

● Identify a quiet soul in your life who communicates God's grace and presence.

GOSPEL

Jesus' disciples argue about who is greatest.

NARRATOR: Jesus and his disciples came down from the mountain and began to go through Galilee but he did not want anyone to know it, for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them—

JESUS: The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.

NARRATOR: But his disciples did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. Then they came to Capernaum, and when he was in the house, he asked them—

JESUS: What were you arguing about on the way?

NARRATOR: They were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve around him, and said to them—

JESUS: Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.

NARRATOR: Then he took a little child and stood the child among them. Jesus took the child in his arms.

JESUS: Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me, but the one who sent me.

Mark 9:30-37



Jesus struggles to help his disciples understand.

Mark's gospel raises the question people ask in every age: why must we suffer? None of us escapes suffering. Many of the losses we experience leave us feeling, as my father so painfully discovered, as if we are invisible.

Mark's gospel begins not with an infancy narrative but with the voice of one crying out in the wilderness—strong language, suggesting suffering. This Sunday for the second time we hear with his disciples

Jesus' lean, spare anticipation of the conflict and suffering that lies ahead for him. He will be handed over and killed but will rise again on the third day. Even in this harsh, difficult territory we find unexpected blessings and gifts.

Sunday's gospel focuses on one of the less elegant moments for Jesus' followers. In the chapters leading up to this passage, Peter has professed his belief that Jesus is the messiah. Peter, James, and John have

experienced Jesus transfigured in glory. All the disciples have witnessed Jesus heal a child whom those left behind when he ascended the mount of transfiguration have been unable to help. Jesus raises the child up from what seems like an epileptic seizure.

We expect their experiences might hold the disciples in a permanent attitude of amazement. But they can't manage it. They can't hold onto these moments. We find them breathtakingly small-minded.

- When have you experienced deflating responses to projects you have envisioned?
- How do you work with resistance to a new project or vision?
- How do you hold on to moments of amazement?

When Jesus teaches his disciples about the suffering ahead, they don't understand but find themselves too afraid to ask questions. They resort to familiar territory—petty conversations about status and accomplishments—the world of who is better and who is best, the place where status matters and all else becomes invisible.

When Jesus and his company reach Capernaum, he sits down alone with the twelve to talk about their arguing. Jesus turns this moment of false pride inside out. The resulting lesson gives us an image of the human

condition that challenges all our assumptions.

A child is the focus of the lesson. To our modern eyes a child can make this seem a sentimental, greeting-card moment. However, bible scholars warn us away from importing our modern notions of childhood into the gospel landscape. In the ancient world children were invisible, non-people of little consequence.



Jesus taking a child in his arms must have shocked the boasting, arguing disciples. Jesus tells them that they must invert their basic beliefs about first and last. They must abandon the usual benchmarks of accomplishment and acclaim. In Jesus' company the invisible become visible, servants are first, and those with higher status fade into the background. Harsh territory. Unexpected blessings.

- When has someone's unexpected generosity inspired you?
- How do the children in your life sustain your resilience?

- Whose service is vital to your day by day existence at home, at work?

The health care professionals I teach become the skilled technicians who do much of the hands-on work in health care services, the heavy lifting of patient care. They do the hardest and often dirtiest jobs, yet they receive the lowest wages.

For these technicians one arched eyebrow, one sigh, can make or break their days. They approach their tasks with humility and grace but fade into the background when those with higher status turn up.

Jesus warns us that to receive a child is to receive the One who sent him. He reminds us that to see those



who invisibly serve is to see a glimmer of the face of God.

Most assuredly my father experienced such a glimmer in the attentive face of his nurse. May others see the glimmer of the holy in us. May we value those who invisibly serve us.

- When have you experienced being invisible?
- When have you recognized the amazing presence of someone long invisible to you?

DO SOMETHING

CHARITY **JUSTICE**

- Learn about the need for wells and catchment systems to provide fresh water for drinking and supporting crops. Visit Change for Global Change, an organization started by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Philadelphia, which funds water projects and teaches water conservation. Their grant awards have reached 73 areas around of the globe. Wells and catchment systems free girls from their daily work of carrying water to their families and allow them to go to school. changeforglobalchange.org.

CHANGE for GLOBAL CHANGE

Israel's Wisdom does not lie in the status quo.

I don't want to be "that guy." You know the one. He is the one who is too cynical to believe the small miracles in life. She is the one who manages to see the frayed edge of every cloud. Never a silver lining. Never a good intention. Never good news. Yet, this is a place to which I can too easily go.

I find myself complaining heartily when I bring work home, forgetting to thank God for the amazing blessing of beautiful, challenging work. I feel put upon when a friend needs my time and attention. I am just too busy, too important to be bothered!

I easily slip into competition for toughest life ever. I forget that staying in the place a friend calls "medium miserable" can lead to a point of view that is terrifying in its spiritual poverty.

Sunday's first reading from the book of Wisdom showcases the attitude of those who think life is short and sorrowful and find the good life an end in itself. Their attitude of privilege and self-righteousness expresses cruelty and power, a willingness to put the just to shameful deaths.

Wisdom put these attitudes in malicious words, "Let us lie in wait for the just whose lives inconveniently oppose our actions." "Let us test their forbearance with insult and torture."

The reading highlights the consequences of self-will running out of control, of self-justification

leading to self-righteousness and bitter rage toward those whose who believe they are children of God and live the law simply and justly. The socially outcast and invisible among us face these terrifying attitudes each day, especially now that hard times have arrived. When my ordinary misery and drama clamor in me, I find them too close to these attitudes for comfort.

Bible scholars comment that these frightening lines of poetry have an embedded lesson: our dignity comes from God. Our dignity does not come from ourselves any more than we are self-created or self-justified.

The reading from Wisdom reminds us that God's word will prove true. God will take care for the just. The Spirit of God breathes through challenges and breathes in us, no matter how small our world has become, no matter how closed down we are to possibilities, no matter how closely we resemble the cynic. May we always be willing to see that this is true.

Wisdom speaks.

Let us lie in wait for those who are righteous because they are inconvenient to us and oppose our actions; they reproach us for sins against the law, and accuse us of sins against our training.

Let us see if their words are true, and let us test what will happen at the end of their lives; for if righteous people are God's children, God will help them and will deliver them from the hand of their adversaries.

Let us test them with insult and torture, so that we may find out how gentle they are and make trial of their forbearance. Let us condemn them to shameful deaths, for, according to what they say, they will be protected.

Wisdom 2.12,17-20

- With what or whom are you too busy to bother?
- How life-giving is your ordinary misery and drama for those close to you?
- What tests your faith and forbearance?

PRAY

Share with the group what it will take to move in the direction of ranking first or of becoming great according to the standards of Jesus.

In the words of the letter of James, pray:

LEADER: Wisdom from above is first of all innocent. It is also peaceable, lenient, docile, rich in sympathy and the kindly deeds that are its fruit, impartial and sincere.

ALL: The harvest of justice is sown in peace for those who cultivate peace.

LEADER: Let the church say Amen!

ALL: Amen.

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.

