

SUNDAY by SUNDAY

By Therese Sherlock, CSJ

Light a single candle in the center of the group and pray this gathering prayer.

LEADER: Let us take a moment of silence to call upon Wisdom to be in our midst. *Pause.* May the Spirit of Wisdom be with world leaders.

ALL: We implore you, Holy One in our midst.

LEADER: May the Spirit of Wisdom be with those who make decisions for the common good.

ALL: May it be so, we ask.

LEADER: May the Spirit of Wisdom fill us today.

ALL: May Wisdom guide our reflections.

LEADER: May the Spirit of Wisdom fill the whole earth.

ALL: And bring it to new birth. Amen.

Families are schools for living, where Jesus' teachings in the sermon on the mount can take deep root. My mother was a cradle Catholic, raised in the years when all church services and Bible passages were in Latin. I don't know where she read or heard the sermon on the mount, but two family rules she insisted on came from there. Don't go to bed angry. Don't call your brothers and sisters

insulting names. Many times she stopped me on my way to bed to make the required apology to a sibling.

Our Irish Setter Rusty and our cat Fritz, whose name belied her many litters of kitties, also modeled getting along. Rusty had a favorite chair. When Fritz wanted it, she stared until Rusty moved. One day Fritz gave up her power stare, jumped up, and nestled in to share the chair ever after.

Years later, I called home from graduate school. When I got caught up on all the family, I asked about Rusty. Mom told me he was dead. A neighbor had shot him because he ran through their garden. I knew what hate was then. I hated that neighbor, Mr. Fuller. I hated every Fuller. And so did everyone else in my family.

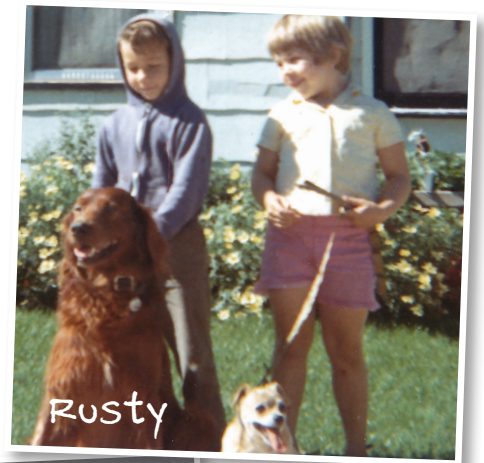
Fast forward 10 years. I am visiting my mom, who is getting ready to attend an event at the church. She tells me it is a 50th wedding anniversary reception for the Fullers. I knew she hated the Fullers as much as any of us.

"How can you go to something honoring them?" I asked.

"Well," she said, "they go to daily Mass and so do I. You can't go to Mass with someone all the time and be angry with them anymore."

You are never too old to learn about holiness from your mother.

- What family rules do your think Mary had for Jesus?
- Which rules from your family have gospel roots?
- Which family rules do you still keep?



GOSPEL

Jesus challenges us to reflect in our hearts.

NARRATOR: Jesus taught his disciples about the law.

JESUS: Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill them. Truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter or stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. I tell you, unless your holiness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees you shall not enter the kingdom of God.

OLD LAW: You have heard the commandment imposed on your ancestors. “You shall not kill,” and “Whoever murders will be liable to judgment.”

JESUS: I say to you, that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, “You fool,” you will be liable to hellfire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled with your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court or your accuser may hand you over to the judge and the judge to the guard and you will be thrown in prison. I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

OLD LAW: You have heard the commandment, “You shall not commit adultery.”

JESUS: I say to you, anyone who looks lustfully at another person’s spouse has already committed adultery in his or her thoughts.



OLD LAW: You have heard the commandment imposed on your ancestors, “Do not take a false oath, but make good to the Lord all your pledges.”

JESUS: I say to you, do not swear at all, either by heaven for it is the throne of God, or by the earth because it is God’s footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great ruler. And do not swear by your head for you cannot make one hair white or black. Say yes when you mean yes and no when you mean no. Anything beyond that is from the evil one.

Matthew 5:17-37

Jesus teaches his new law.

In Sunday’s gospel Jesus contrasts the law of his ancestors, the ten commandments, with his teachings. He opens his teachings on each commandment, saying, “You have heard...” and then immediately counters, “But I say to you.”

Jesus challenges his hearers not only to keep the commandments but to deal

with the daily actions that have killing effects, the false promises that betray trust, the desires that misdirect our lives. Jesus wants his followers to build communities that show forth the power Jesus reveals as God’s own—love and reconciliation.

Jesus invites us to reach into our inner conscious lives where we can transform any anger and abusiveness that lives

inside. He calls us to reflect on our attitudes and measure our actions by his standard of love and compassion. He wants us to participate in the work of transforming our lives.

The commandments reach back 12 centuries before Jesus. The gospels reach back 20 centuries to Jesus. By doing the work of conscience and wrestling with what his teachings mean today, we can

bring Jesus' teachings into our own time.

Jesus doesn't address friending and unfriending on Facebook or how texting wounds without face-to-face contact. Jesus brings up taking debtors to court and swearing false oaths but nothing about sorting truth from lies in a global world that feeds on sensation and spin 24/7.

- Which teachings work in your heart to make you a more loving person?
- What new rules has your family created for living in our wide, wired world?

You shall not kill" is the first commandment to which Jesus attaches his new law. Anger and insult can kill, he explains. To reconcile demands getting beyond stand offs—my way or no way. Reconciling involves seeing another person's point of view or accepting that another intended no harm.

Reconciling can reveal one's own mean streak in a relationship that requires working through. To reconcile can revive and recreate a relationship, giving it new life. A hard and sour heart makes us incapable of meeting God in worship.

Anger can be a harmful habit. To break a habit one needs tools for small daily reconciliations. When some newly-married couples met with Pope Francis, they asked his blessing and advice. "What do I know?" the pope said laughingly but then offered three daily habits that can help make a marriage work: "I'm sorry," "Thank you," and "May I, please?"

Anger can seem dangerous and unmanageable but it is also user-friendly, alerting us that we have choices to make. We feel anger when our expectations aren't met, when someone puts us down, ignores our opinions, talks while we are talking, takes credit for an idea, boasts, hurts us or someone we love. Anger arises when we witness or experience an injustice or abuse of a person, or abuse of the natural world. Anger can impel us into action.

We don't have choices about feeling angry, but we do have choices about how we act on our feelings. We can consciously reflect on our emotional responses. Maybe we work at expressing anger directly to the person who didn't meet our expectations, so anger from the workplace

doesn't get dumped on the kids or spouse or anger at home go to work.

- What helps you deal with anger?
- What is attractive about not holding grudges?
- How do you contribute to making your family and workplace a reconciling community?

You shall not commit adultery," Jesus says, quoting the 6th commandment, and adds that looking lustfully at another person's spouse is the same. Desires can both inspire us and sidetrack us. Desire for justice can put us to work to change policies and help people in need. On the other hand an expensive spa day or a shiny new car can entice us.

God comes among us in Jesus. He teaches us that we can find the holy in the human. Our relationships with one another are places of revelation; we meet God in them.

Teilhard de Chardin stresses how inseparable mind, body, and spirit are when he observes that the human mind is the primary sex organ. We choose when and with whom to engage in sexual intercourse. Our sexuality involves our whole selves. Jesus' exhortation to be single-hearted and honest with ourselves is a trademark of his teaching. What is in our hearts counts. Who is in our hearts counts.

Christian community depends upon our capacity for friendship and fidelity,



for tenderness and support, for delight and ecstasy. We cannot be spiritual without being sexual. We have our whole bodies and whole selves with which to express our love.

● **Where does your heart lead you?**

● **What relationships between sexuality and spirituality do you see?**



Human beings can choose.

The wisdom teacher Sirach writes in the last centuries before Christ. The bible refers to his writing by name or by the title Ecclesiasticus. His advice anticipates the insights of Matthew in this Sunday's Gospel.

Sirach recognizes human beings have the capacity to make choices. We can choose to keep God's commandments, or not. We can stretch out our hands toward fire or water, toward life or death. The Holy One knows every human action, Sirach tells us, yet we have freedom of choice and opportunities to learn from consequences.

Our freedom has not been good news for some of us.

Doing the right thing seems easier when someone in authority tells us what the right thing is. Today parents have to find words to welcome a son's or daughter's same-sex partner or talk with children who don't want to attend Mass any more.

Vatican II echoes Sirach in describing conscience. "Deep within their consciences men and women discover a law which they have not laid upon themselves and which they must obey. Its voice, ever calling them to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, tells them inwardly at the right moment: do this, shun that.

"For they have in their hearts a law inscribed by God. Their dignity rests in observing this law, and by it they will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and the sanctuary of the human person. There they are alone with God whose voice echoes in their depths" (*Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* #16).

This law that we find in our hearts is the Wisdom of God. We foster this Wisdom when we attend to our inner lives and actions and when we join the community of believers that continues the healing,

teaching, compassionate, inclusive ministry of Jesus.

Faithfulness is a choice.

If you choose, you can keep the commandments; you can choose to act faithfully. There is before you fire and water.

Stretch forth your hand toward whichever you choose. Before each human person are life and death; what each chooses will be given.

Great is the wisdom of God, who is mighty in power and all seeing. God's eyes are on those who fear God; the Holy One knows every human action. God has not commanded anyone to be wicked, nor given anyone permission to sin.

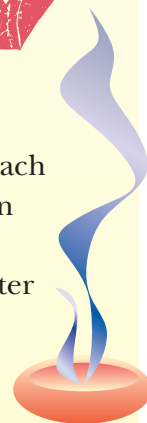
Sirach 15:15-20

● **What wisdom do you find written in your heart?**

PRAY

Take time for group members to write on a slip of paper insights each has gained in reflection together. Take turns saying them aloud. After each statement, pray together.

All: You challenge us, Jesus, to be daily bread for one another.



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An illustration of two footprints. The left footprint is labeled "CHARITY" and the right footprint is labeled "JUSTICE". Both are in a stylized, orange-brown font.

DO SOMETHING

Keep track this week when you say yes and mean yes and when you say no and mean no. Complete an activity to which you have said yes but haven't done yet.

Take time for **prayer** during Lent. Look at the books page at goodgroundpress.com for books to help you pray. Or make one of our **online retreats**. Let faith grow in you.