

Set a stone at the center of your group. Place a set of keys nearby and a lighted candle. Open a bible on the table. Pray together to prepare for reflecting on God's word.

LEADER: What do we want to last in our changing world? I invite each person in the group to name one reality they want to last.

Take turns responding.

LEADER: How deep are the riches—

ALL: And the wisdom and the knowledge of God!

LEADER: How inscrutable God's judgments—

ALL: How unsearchable God's ways.

LEADER: Who has given God anything so as to deserve return?

ALL: For from God, through God, and for God, all things are.

“Who do people say that I am?” Jesus wants feedback in Sunday's gospel. He asks this question halfway through his public ministry.

Is Jesus the long-awaited leader and prince of peace for whom Isaiah dreamed, an alternative to the God-forsaking, warring kings of the prophet's time? Jesus' disciples think so. Is he God's servant who like the exiled Israelites suffers to

reveal God's vision of justice to the nations? Hmmmm. Jesus' disciples haven't got this far yet.

Jesus' question is a brave one. What are people saying about me? I ask that question when I interview potential employees. What do your colleagues or clients say about you? What are you proud that they say about you?

Jesus' question to his first disciples echoes down the centuries to every Christian. Is Jesus a prophetic reformer who hopes to breathe life into the legalistic religion of his day and who challenges us to do the same? Is he a revolutionary whose inflammatory preaching catches him in the gears of Caesar's empire? Is he the greatest party giver of all time who invites everyone to come to his banquets?

In our new context of evolution we ask, “Isn't Jesus, who is the Christ, the omega point in whom all creation will converge? Isn't he the firstborn of a new creation who

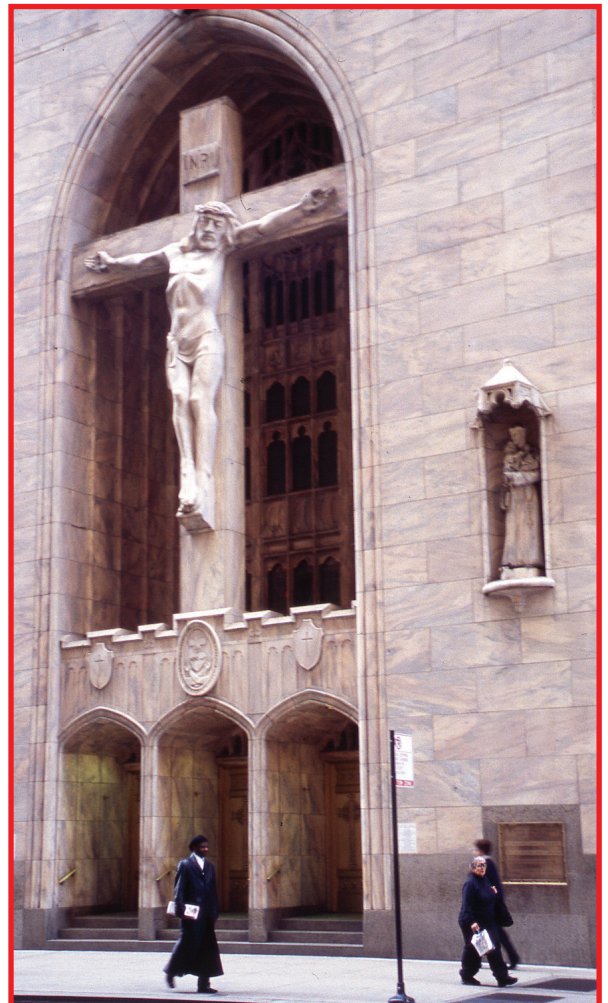
testifies that love is the ultimate transforming power in the cosmos?”

Jesus' question is also one to ask ourselves. What feedback do we hear about ourselves as Christians in our society that sees faith as a private matter?

● Who do other people say you are? Who has noticed you are a Christian?

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY



GOSPEL

Who do you say that I am?

NARRATOR: Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples this.

JESUS: Who do people say the Son of Man is?

DISCIPLES: Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.

JESUS: But you, who do you say that I am?

PETER: You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.



JESUS: Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

NARRATOR: He sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Matthew 16.13-20

What is the rock on which the Christian community stands?

Matthew's gospel has a prevailing concern for the evolving Christian community. In the New Testament, only Matthew uses the word *church*—once in Sunday's gospel, 16.18, and once in 18.17.

The word *church* means the *assembly* or *congregation*, the people of the Christian community. The word in Greek is *ekklesia*, which translates the word *qhl* in Hebrew, again meaning the *assembly* or *people of God*.

Peter shows leadership among Jesus' disciples in Sunday's gospel. Peter is the one who identifies Jesus as

the Messiah, the Son of the living God. In response to his expression of faith, Jesus blesses Peter and insists God has revealed this insight to Peter.

This blessing section, the right column in the gospel above, appears only in Matthew's gospel and underscores Peter's importance to the Church that is evolving in the A.D. 80s, when the gospel is written. Peter has a less exalted position in Mark's gospel, which deliberately juxtaposes this scene in which Peter confesses his faith back to back with a scene in

which Peter objects to Jesus' prediction he will suffer and die in Jerusalem. Peter believes in an all-powerful warrior king, not a self-giving leader who will suffer the apparent defeat of death.

Mark's gospel focuses on how Peter's faith grows and deepens. Peter professes only a shallow faith at first. During Jesus' passion, he overestimates his loyalty to Jesus, denies him, and appears for the last time in the narrative in tears of regret—a chastened disciple, one who grows from misunderstanding and denial to give his life to Jesus' mission as an apostle and martyr.

The lectionary heightens Matthew's positive emphasis by reading Peter's confession and Jesus' blessing this Sunday and waiting until next Sunday to read the negative scene.

● **How do you answer Jesus' question today? Who do you say Jesus is?**

For Matthew, Peter's confession is more than human insight. It is God who reveals Jesus' messianic identity to Peter and the other disciples. In the words of his blessing, Jesus echoes his earlier prayer thanking his Father for hiding things from the wise and revealing them to infants (Matthew 11.25-27).

Indeed, Peter's faith may be in infancy at this point in Matthew's narrative but at the time Matthew writes in history, the A.D. 80s, Peter's faith has led him to the ultimate act of faith and



- What do you regard as the sure foundation of the church?
- What answers to who Jesus is have you outgrown? Who do you say Jesus is today?
- What do you want to be unchanging in the Christian community?

imitation of Jesus—martyrdom about A.D. 64. Jesus' blessing affirms both Peter's first faith and his ultimate act of faith. It places the foundations of the church on faith that is both God's gift and our unfolding identity.

● **How has faith in Jesus become part of your identity?**

The play around Peter's names identifies him as a follower of the crucified and risen messiah. First, Peter is Simon, son of Jonah, a relationship that points him out as spiritual kin of the prophet Jonah, who symbolizes resurrection.

When scribes and Pharisees ask Jesus for a sign, he says they will receive no sign but the sign of the prophet Jonah. "For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale so for three days

and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth" (12.18-40).

Peter is also the rock (*petra*, in Greek) on which Jesus will build his church. The gates of Hades is a metaphor for death and suggests Peter's martyrdom. Peter, whose first faith seemed as shallow as the rocky ground of the parable and who once denied any relationship with Jesus, is also the rock, a disciple who gives his life in following Jesus, who acts on his faith that death will not prevail against the promise of Jesus' resurrection.

In the final saying of his sermon on the mount, Jesus says, "Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock" (7.24). The house, an image of church, withstands rain, floods, and wind. The believing disciple is the sure foundation of the Christian community.

Matthew weaves allusions to the scriptures of Israel throughout his gospel. In Sunday's gospel Jesus' ministry has people wondering if he is John the Baptist, the prophet Elijah returned or Jeremiah? Each prophet preaches judgment. Each faces rejection and persecution, hinting rejection ahead for Jesus.

Elijah had to run for his life after he takes on Queen Jezebel and the prophets of the Canaanite god Baal in a prayer duel to end a three-year drought. No god burns the other prophets' sacrifice when they cry out for rain. But when Elijah prays to the God of Israel, fire consumes his sacrifice and small rain clouds gather at sea. The drought ends, but Elijah must escape the queen's vengeance (1 Kings 17-19).

Jeremiah's life closely parallels Jesus' life. When the king and people do not listen to his call to trust God and care for the poor, Jeremiah warns that God will fight against them and for the Babylonians. He wears a yoke to symbolize how Babylon will enslave Israel. He suffers the fate of the people with them,

DO SOMETHING

- Learn more about another Christian community in your area. Go to a service, read their bulletin or website, attend a social event such as a rummage sale or dinner. Find out who they say Jesus is and what they tell the world about him by their words and their actions.

CHARITY

JUSTICE

living through the siege and destruction of Jerusalem, only to be killed in Egypt, probably by his own people.

In Matthew's narrative news that Herod has had the Baptist beheaded moves Jesus to withdraw to a deserted spot. Crowds follow and find him. He heals their sick and multiplies loaves and fish to feed first 5,000 Jews and later 4,000 Gentiles. For Peter and the disciples these are compelling signs that Jesus is the messiah.

● **Who do you see suffering with people today in prophetic ways?**

● **How do you see the Christian community suffering with people?**



The chamberlain holds the household secure.

Sunday's first reading places in Old Testament messianic context Jesus' giving of the keys to the kingdom of heaven to Peter. The passage from Isaiah revolves around the office of the king's chamberlain, his second in command.

Shebna seems to use the office to benefit himself; he has had a fancy tomb hewn for himself. So God sends Isaiah to dismiss Shebna and install Eliakim. In ancient Judah these offices were probably hereditary like kingship.

The passage makes clear that the chamberlain must serve in the king's stead. The king's keys represent his authority. The chamberlain can open and shut the palace gates and shares the king's responsibility to be a father to the people. The chamberlain must be like a secure tent peg that holds up the whole household.

Matthew sees the church as the messiah's household, continuing the Davidic household. Jesus gives Peter keys to bind and loose on earth, to open and shut, forgive and withhold forgiveness. Interestingly, Jesus gives this same power to the members of his household, the church, in Matthew 18.18.

Ideal chamberlain

Thus says the Lord of hosts: Go to Shebna, who is master of the household and say to him: What right do you have here? Who are your relatives here, that you have cut out a tomb for yourself, cutting a tomb on the height, and carving a habitation for yourself in the rock?

I will thrust you from your office, and you will be pulled down from your post. On that day I will call my servant Eliakim son of Hilkiah, and will clothe him with your robe and bind your sash on him. I will commit your authority to his hand, and he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah.

I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open and no one shall shut; he shall shut, and no one shall open. I will fasten him like a peg

in a secure place, and he will become a throne of honor to his ancestral house.

Isaiah 22.15-16, 19-23

● **What qualities do you consider ideal in those who hold responsibilities for the messiah's household, the Church?**

● **Who opens and shuts gates in your parish?**

PRAY

Make prayer petitions identifying what you see as keys to open and shut life in your neighborhood or parish community. Make statements, such as *"May we find the key to open our parish to reach out to the single mothers among us,"* or *"May people realize that in the keys to their cars they hold the key to helping elderly people in the parish come to Sunday Eucharist."*

ALL: God, our rock, in whom we take refuge, make us the sure and living foundation of our community of believers following Jesus today.



Joan Mitchell, CSJ, editor of Sunday by Sunday, holds a Masters in Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School and a Ph.D. in New Testament from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN.