

By Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Place a small crucifix or piece of art depicting Jesus at the center of your group. Bless each other by passing the crucifix or art around the circle and addressing each other by name:

_____, *Jesus wants to stay at your house today.*

LEADER: Holy Wisdom, you have mercy because you can do all things.

ALL: You overlook our sins, so we can change.

LEADER: You love all that exists.

ALL: You detest nothing you have made.

LEADER: You are gracious and merciful,

ALL: Slow to anger and of great kindness.

LEADER: Good to all.

ALL: Compassionate toward all your works.

Zacchaeus is so curious about Jesus that he climbs a tree to see him. What satisfies our curiosity? Where does our capacity to question take us?

Parents experience the human seeker in action in their children. By five kids ask questions. Who made the trees? Who is my mommy's mommy? Who is my daddy's daddy's daddy? In the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas questions like this lead ultimately to the unmoved mover that is God.

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

Lutheran theologian Marcus Borg liked to ask his doubting students to tell him about the God they no longer believed in. Often their God is the all-knowing, all-powerful God who made the universe and has a plan for every person.

This concept of God falls apart when God is not powerful enough to answer our fervent prayers or prevent the Holocaust and seems apart and uncaring. How can I trust that this God has a plan for me?

Theologian Karl Rahner began his doctoral dissertation with a two word sentence: *Man fragt*, in German; *one asks*, in English. He stressed the *quest in questioning*, the human thirst for the infinite. Rahner wanted to make God bigger, unbounded, to revive the mystery God is.

Rahner suggests we will have to make our own quests for God if we are to be Christians in our time when our culture isn't.

As a seeker myself, I spent months alone on the North Shore writing a book on Mark's gospel. One of these times I was reading Beatrice Bruteau's book *God's Ecstasy*. A passage came alive to me that said, "God is nothing," no-thing,



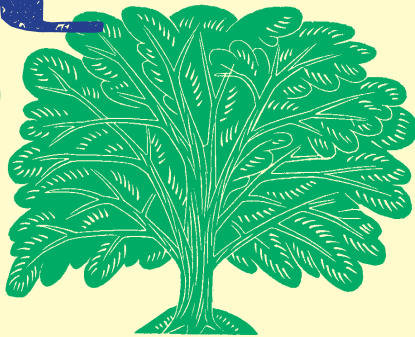
beyond any words, ungraspable, unbounded. This is theological principle number one: If you think your words describe God, they don't. This was a sacred moment, an uncluttering of all my notions of God, a spring cleaning, a shedding of images.

This experience created new space within. Paradoxically, I have felt a greater intimacy with God, an embrace in the mystery that is ever-present like air and sunlight.

- When have you climbed a tree to see more in your life?
- When have you experienced an anchoring God moment? How has the moment influenced your faith?

GOSPEL

Jesus becomes the guest of a sinner named Zacchaeus.



NARRATOR: Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through the city. There was a man there named Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector and a wealthy man. He was trying to see who Jesus was but, on account of the crowd, he could not because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see Jesus because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up.

JESUS: Zacchaeus, hurry down, I must stay at your house today.

NARRATOR: He hurried down and welcomed him with delight. When people in the crowd saw this, they began to murmur.

MURMURER: Jesus has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.

NARRATOR: Zacchaeus spoke to Jesus.

ZACCHAEUS: I will give half my possessions, Lord, to the poor. If I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.

JESUS: Today salvation has come to this house for he, too, is a son of Abraham. The Son of Man has come to seek out and save the lost.

Luke 19.1-10

Jesus calls Zacchaeus to his place in the whole.

The most schooled and elegant of the gospel writers, Luke characterizes Zacchaeus with two telling details. The chief tax collector is rich and short. A simple desire motivates Zacchaeus and creates the action in Luke's story. Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus. He is a seeker.

Zacchaeus is too short to catch a glimpse of Jesus in the crowd, and perhaps too rich with ill-gotten money for the crowd to treat him sympathetically and let him through. Zacchaeus runs

ahead of the crowd and climbs the sycamore tree.

The name Zacchaeus means *clean*. In the eyes of the people Zacchaeus is far from clean. As the chief tax collector for the Romans, his own people reject him, push him to the margins, and judge him outside their circle of law-keeping townspeople.

We readers don't learn why Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus—perhaps curiosity. Or, perhaps they have met before. Maybe they have an unfinished

conversation. Possibly Jesus' teaching entralls Zacchaeus, and he wants to see him and hear him in person. The simplicity of the story invites us to supply motives and, in doing so, reveal what might motivate us.

When Jesus enters the scene and notices Zacchaeus in the tree, he immediately invites himself into this outsider's life. Jesus calls Zacchaeus by name, which suggests a prior meeting. Perhaps like everyone else, Jesus knows the chief tax collector from having to deal with him and pay the taxes he exacts for the Romans.

By climbing the tree, Zacchaeus has opened himself to meeting Jesus. Jesus responds with urgency, "Zacchaeus, hurry down."

In one extraordinary moment Jesus sees and connects with Zacchaeus. All of us who have looked into the face of unconditional love—faces absent of criticism, judgment, or blame—know in our deepest selves what happens to Zacchaeus in this encounter.

- Who has brought you into a community of acceptance and love?
- Who called you by name to discover who Jesus is?
- What stimulates your desire to know Jesus more fully?

Jesus reverses roles with Zacchaeus, who as the homeowner ought to invite Jesus, the itinerant preacher, to his house. Instead, Jesus invites himself as a guest into

Zacchaeus's life, demonstrating his mission to reach out to all and enter our lives.

In this act Jesus reaches out to befriend an outsider and a sinner. Zacchaeus has made himself a sinner among his own Jewish people by collecting Roman tolls and taxes and collaborating with Rome's imperial bureaucracy.

Jewish law regards Zacchaeus as ritually unclean and unworthy to come before God in the temple. Because Zacchaeus is culticly unclean, any Jew who eats with him becomes unclean and requires purification before temple worship.

Zacchaeus welcomes Jesus to his house with delight. But the crowd reacts with murmuring. They know that according to Jewish law, Zacchaeus is a sinner. If Jesus associates with a man everyone knows is a sinner and a cheat, then who is Jesus and why are they following him?

Zacchaeus is the CEO that backdates earnings to get bigger stock options, hides losses off the books in nonexistent businesses, or overlooks flaws in the product on the assembly line. Reaching out to a sinner contradicts the crowd's understanding of upright action. Jesus scandalizes and upsets them, just as the father's feast for the prodigal son upsets his older brother in Luke 15.11-32.

- How do you see yourself, as an outsider or insider?
- What benefit do you experience in reaching out to people others marginalize?



Jesus' final statement in the gospel makes his mission clear: he comes to seek out and save the lost. Jesus draws the marginalized tax collector into the mystery of God's unconditional love.

In response Zacchaeus pledges the almsgiving that marks a true Jew, a son of Abraham. He pledges half his possessions to people who are poor. He promises to repay anyone he has defrauded fourfold. Neither the law nor his greed isolate Zacchaeus any longer.

Zacchaeus shares the love he has received, moving toward his neighbors, putting his wealth to work for the common

good, acting for the well-being of the whole rather than his own. His actions show respect for the dignity of the poor and their rights to food, shelter, work. For Luke, his actions demonstrate how Christians should use their wealth.

In the gospels that end the Church year Luke invites us to evaluate with Jesus our place in the whole, to invest our gifts and wealth in the common good, and extend hospitality outside our usual circles. At every eucharist Jesus comes to our house. His gift of himself gathers us into a holy communion that we daily live out.

- When have you felt lost? Who found you?
- What groups do you stand with and identify with?
- Whose struggles do our own public servants need to visit and include in work for the common good?
- How has participating in eucharist changed you over time?



FIRST READING

God's spirit is in all things.

Sunday's first reading describes God's wise, creative love. The poetry from Israel's wisdom traditions goes beyond seeing created wonders as good because God made them to seeing that God loves every last thing and person. God detests or loathes nothing or none of us. God's love is immense, God's spirit immanent in all things.

The Wisdom or Sophia tradition is writing that comes from late in Israel's history. In it Jewish and Greek thinking intermix. In the poetry of Sunday's reading from Wisdom, the poet mixes Jewish faith in God the creator with Greek intuition that something spiritual permeates and unifies all that is.

In Sunday's gospel Luke portrays Jesus in the imagery of the Wisdom tradition. Jesus is not condemning toward a man the community regards as a sinner but compassionate and welcoming.

Compassion and mercy characterize God and the holiness of the truly Godlike community.

God loves all that is.

The whole world before you is like a speck that tips the scales, like a drop of morning dew that falls on the ground. But you are merciful to all, for you can do all things, and you overlook people's sins, so that they may repent.

For you love all things that exist, and detest none of the things that you have made, for you would not have made anything if you had hated it.

How would anything have endured if you had not willed it? Or how would anything not called forth by you have been preserved?

You spare all things, for they are yours, O Holy One, you who love the living. For your immortal spirit is in all things.

Therefore you rebuke offenders little by little, warn them and remind them of the sins they are committing, that they may abandon their wickedness and believe in you.

Wisdom 11.22-12.2

- How do you experience the presence of God's Spirit in creation?

PRAY

Stand and respond **I do** to the profession of faith based on Sunday's readings.

LEADER: We have heard Jesus Christ say that today salvation comes to our house. Let us renew our faith that Jesus is near. Do you believe that our God loves all that is and despises or loathes nothing that has been made?

LEADER: Do you believe God's imperishable spirit is in all things and in you?

LEADER: Do you believe salvation will come today?

Leader takes the crucifix and gives it to the person at right with a personal blessing or the words below. Each person in turn blesses the person to the right.

_____, Jesus blesses us always.

All: We pray for each other that God may make us worthy of our call in Christ and—by loving power—fulfill in us every work of faith so that we may be glorified in Christ and Christ in us all the days of our lives. Amen.

LEADER: Let us go forth in wisdom and peace.

All: Thanks be to God. Conclude with 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, Minnesota.



DO SOMETHING

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Practice listening to people whose thoughts and values differ from your own. Seek to learn about concerns you share.



ADVENT NAMES OF GOD

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