

by Susan Hames, CSJ

Open a bible in the center of your group. Light a candle beside it. Place your key rings beside the bible as a symbol of all you have power to open and close. Share what one of these keys unlocks for you or empowers you to do or be.

LEADER: Loving God, we come to hear and do your word. Let us name aloud the dreams, desires, and relationships your word opens for us.

Take turns responding.

LEADER: Jesus, you rescue us from the power of darkness and enable us to share the lot of the saints in light.

ALL: Here we are, your bone and your flesh.

LEADER: Through you we are redeemed and our sins are forgiven.

ALL: Here we are, your bone and your flesh.

LEADER: You are the fullness of life; you reconcile all things in yourself.

ALL: Here we are, your bone and your flesh.

LEADER: You make peace through the blood of the cross.

ALL: Here we are, your bone and your flesh.

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

“Drugs, egos, my crew and his playing off each other, it went too far.” That’s how Oshea Israel remembers the night he murdered Laramiun Byrd, 20, the only son of Mary Johnson. Tried and convicted as an adult at 16, Oshea received a 25-year prison sentence.

“I thought of my son’s killer as an animal that deserved to be caged,” says Mary Johnson after the trial. For 12 years Mary nurtured hate for this young man.

A poem entitled “The Two Mothers” changed her heart. In the poem two mothers meet in heaven and talk about the joy of their sons’ growing up. One is Mary, Jesus’ mother, who tells the other, “When they crucified him...How gladly would I have hung there in his place.”

Mary asks the other woman the name of her son “that I may share your grief and woe.”

The other woman answers, “He was Judas Iscariot; I am his mother.”

The poem challenged Mary Johnson to work on herself and her anger. “I asked God what I had to do,” she says. “I prayed for Oshea. I chose to forgive.”

Slowly Mary came to the point of wanting to visit Oshea in prison. To prepare, she participated in four hours of required training in victim-offender dialog. She had to explain why she wanted to meet Oshea.

That visit changed both their lives. They shared their stories.



“We just got to know each other,” Oshea remembers.

In the end Mary asked to hug Oshea. “I remember thinking that I just hugged the man who murdered my son. The anger was over, gone. Now I treat him like a son. The hand of God was all over this.”

“Anger will eat you from the inside out,” says Mary, who founded an organization to heal other mothers of murder victims—From Death to Life. “The forgiveness was for me,” she explains.

Oshea didn’t want to go home from prison the same person he came in. He served 17 years, lives next door to Mary, and does

presentations with her in schools and churches.

● When have you experienced a challenge to change your heart?



fromdeathtolife
Healing families, restoring communities

GOSPEL

Forgiveness is Jesus' signature act.

NARRATOR: Jesus was crucified on the place called the Skull and with him two criminals, one on his right and one on his left. People stood by watching. The leaders kept jeering at Jesus.

LEADERS: He saved others. Let him save himself if he is the messiah of God, the chosen one.

NARRATOR: Soldiers also made fun of Jesus. They came up to him and offered him sour wine.

SOLDIERS: If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.

NARRATOR: Over Jesus' head was an inscription, "This is the king of the Jews." One of the criminals hanging beside Jesus blasphemed him.

CRIMINAL 1: Aren't you the messiah? Then save yourself and us.

NARRATOR: The other criminal rebuked him.



CRIMINAL 2: Don't you even fear God? You are under the same sentence of death yourself. We deserve it, after all. We are paying the price for what we have done, but this man has done nothing wrong. Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

JESUS: I assure you, this day you will be with me in paradise.

Luke 23:35-43

(Leviticus 25). Every 50th year, the Israelites are to right and restore their relationships with one another. For example, they are to free those who have become slaves in order to pay debts and release those imprisoned for unpaid debts. People can buy back ancestral land they have had to sell.

A jubilee then is about forgiving debts, righting relationships, restoring earth, restoring community to equality before God. By proclaiming a year of God's favor, Jesus demonstrates in our midst God's life-giving power. He is about forgiving sinners, healing the sick, liberating those who are oppressed. He is good news for the poor.

This biblical background calls us to reflect on relationships we need to right, debts we need to forgive, and the renewal the church needs to achieve in order to flourish and serve the human community.

● To whom do you show too little mercy? From whom do you need forgiveness?

● What injustice is in your power to help set right?

Sunday's gospel comes from Luke's account of the passion of Jesus. The crowds have abandoned Jesus and their leaders taunt him in this scene.

The charge against Jesus hangs over his head on the cross. It charges him with claiming to be "King of the Jews," the messiah, the one the Spirit anoints to heal and set people free.

What kind of king and kin is Jesus?

“Jesus is the face of God's mercy,” Pope Francis tells us. “These words might well sum up the mystery of the Christian faith. Mercy has become living and visible in Jesus of Nazareth, reaching its culmination in him.” In forgiving the thief Jesus shows the balm of mercy clearly.

Jesus is no ordinary king. He reigns from the cross, not a throne. He forgives a thief as his final act rather than command an army to his rescue. In this act of forgiveness Jesus completes the mission he announces in Nazareth, his hometown, when

he reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and says he fulfills the words he has read. He is the prophet the Spirit anoints.

The Spirit of the Holy One is upon me and has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and freedom for the oppressed, to proclaim a year of favor from God (Luke 4.16-21).

A year of favor is a jubilee, a year of mercy. The Old Testament book Leviticus contains the laws of the jubilee

One of the two criminals hanging with Jesus in crucifixion recognizes Jesus is the anointed one, God's chosen and true king of the Jews. This criminal, whom Christians traditionally call the good thief, seeks the pardon and mercy only a king in Israel can give.

His words recall Jewish prayers of old. Jews asked God to remember them, to keep them in existence. To remember is to give life and relationship.

Jews remembered God by reciting and singing the stories of God's saving deeds among them. They asked God to continue being God for them and to continue doing such things among them. In asking Jesus to remember him, the good thief asks for relationship and continuing life with him.

The good thief also testifies that Jesus is innocent. This man believes God's kingdom will come, will vindicate Jesus, and identify him as the messiah of Israel.

Immediately Jesus responds with welcome and assurance, "This day you will be with me in paradise." His words transform the past of the thief and include him among the kin of God.

● With whom in your family, your work, or your neighborhood do you need to reestablish relationships?

● What people belong to God but challenge our usual boundaries of kinship?

In this crucifixion scene of mercy Luke gives us the gospel in cameo. Luke tells his community and us that Jesus



is God's Spirit-filled prophet, innocent of charges brought but faithful to the mission for which the Spirit anointed him. He brings good news to the poor and freedom to the poor, the indebted, the exploited. Jesus embodies servant leadership; he gives himself rather than subordinate people to serve him.

To the good thief, Jesus acts as the bearer of God's mercy and forgiveness. He sets the captive free. Thus, Luke emphasizes the mystery and universality of God's favor and Jesus' mission and message: the poor, the ignorant, and wrongdoers who recognize their need are the chosen ones and the kin of God.

Pope Francis's prayer for this feast echoes the gospel. "We will entrust the life of the Church, all humanity, and the entire cosmos to the Lordship of Christ, asking him to pour out his mercy upon us like the morning dew, so that everyone may work together to build a brighter future."

● For what innocent people do you speak out like the good thief?

● When like the soldiers do you mock the invisible power of love and forgiveness?

● When do you, like the bystanders, remain silent and refuse to enter into a struggle or a celebration?

DO SOMETHING

CHARITY **JUSTICE**

- Visit Fromdeathtolife.us and listen to Mary Johnson and Oshea Israel tell their stories.
- Learn more about the healing power of victim offender dialogue at Restorative Justice Online. www.restorativejustice.org
- Investigate the movement for restorative justice in your area.

David unites his kin.

Sunday's first reading tells the story of the tribes anointing David King of Israel. It provides the Jewish background for Luke's presentation of Jesus in Sunday's gospel. It contains all the technical elements by which Israel chose and installed its kings.

All the people of all the tribes assemble. They publicly proclaim their kinship to David, their loyalty to him, "Here we are, your bone and your flesh." They testify to their experience of his leadership, "It was you who led the Israelites out and brought them back."

This biblical language recalls the way God led Israel out of Egypt and brought them back to the land that was to be their own. God has gathered them, guarded, and guided them out of slavery in Egypt. God nurtured them through hunger and homelessness in the desert to become a united people.

As king, David will serve to bring God's mercy among the people. He will care for the poor and liberate them from oppression. This is what he agrees with the elders to do.

The elders recognize in David one called to be God's commander. By anointing him king, they agree

to his leadership as servant of God's mercy.

Today evolution gives us new insight into who is bone of our bone. Evolution calls us to recognize not only all other humans are kin but that we are one and interdependence with all that is.

David becomes king.

All the tribes of Israel came to David in Hebron and said, "Here we are, your bone and your flesh. In days past, when Saul was our king, it was you who led the Israelites out and brought them back. And the Holy One said to you, 'You shall be commander of Israel.'"

When all the elders of Israel came to David at Hebron, King David made an agreement with them there before the Holy One, and they anointed him king of Israel.

2 Samuel 5:1-3

- How does the concept of kinship affect your understanding of kingship?
- How does substituting the word kin for king in the phrase the kin*dom of God change its meaning for you?

PRAY

LEADER: Let us give thanks to God who welcomes us among the saints in light.

ALL: We are kin of God's beloved son.

LEADER: Jesus is before all things and in him all things hold together.

ALL: In him the fullness of God dwells.

LEADER: He reconciles to himself all things.

ALL: On earth and in heaven.

LEADER: Let us pray for leaders in our world who share the Spirit of Jesus.

Respond to each prayer with the words of the good thief, spoken or sung. (See "Jesus, Remember Me," Gather #404).

ALL: Jesus, remember us when you come into your kingdom.



Susan Hames, CSJ, holds an MA in liturgy from St. John's University, Colleeville, MN. She is a member of the Leadership Team of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, St. Paul.

FREE FAMILY ADVENT POSTER

Go to goodgroundpress.com to print a copy of the 2019 Advent poster. Make this **Advent time a blessing** for your family by completing the Christmas tree of **prayers and activities**.



THE ADVENT NAMES OF GOD

Pray the O Antiphons with illustrations by Ansgar Holmberg and prayer poems by Joan Mitchell, CSJ, traditional Advent prayers of longing for God's coming among us. A 20-page Advent retreat. Only \$10.00.

View a sample page at goodgroundpress.com

