

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Place an open bible and lighted candle at the center of your group. Pray together from Sunday's second reading to prepare for hearing and reflecting on the gospel.

LEADER: Spirit of God who dwells among us, help us recognize ways we can invest in good relationships with our neighbors.

ALL: Owe no debt to anyone except the debt that binds us to love one another.

LEADER: May we take the small, everyday risks that build ties with one another.

ALL: Those who love their neighbors have fulfilled the law.

I try to run for 30 minutes at least two or three times every week. Over the years my workouts have given me exercise in weighing truth and falsehood as well as stronger lungs.

The elliptical machines at the workout center form a row facing ten television monitors. I can watch several morning programs simultaneously. I can see CBS, NBC, and Fox together or move down the row for CNN and MSNBC with Fox visible at a distance.

Often the channels cover the same breaking news or political events. What each channel emphasizes reveals differing takes on the story. I watch and read the captions and the messages across the bottom of the screens.

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SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

car we deserve. Politics employs facts and alternative facts to market platforms and promises, never more vigorously than in an election year.

In Hebrew the word for truth refers to what holds and stands firm like the stakes that hold a tent in place. In our world truth isn't as fixed, certain, and clear as many might prefer. Life is not the same for the 1% and the 99%, for women and men, for people of different races and ethnic groups, for island people with rising sea levels and prairie farmers of the Midwest. The stakes that hold them firmly in place differ. Each of us views events from where we stand. We depend on others to communicate their reality; others depend on us to take in their reality.

Finding truth is both an individual search and a collective one. To make judgments, we go through an individual process of looking at consequences and



outcomes. We consider our own ideals and motivations. We also draw on collective standards of character and moral conduct such as the ten commandments and standards of caring in our society and church such as the common good.

We have minds to weigh what is true and consciences to weigh what is right. Sunday's gospel suggests a negotiating process for righting wrongs in the Christian community.

● **What successes or frustrations have you experienced in seeking the truth in situations?**



Sunday Readings: Ezekiel 33.7-9, Romans 13.8-10, Matthew 18.15-20

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GOSPEL

Jesus counsels Christians to talk conflicts through.

NARRATOR: Jesus spoke to his disciples.

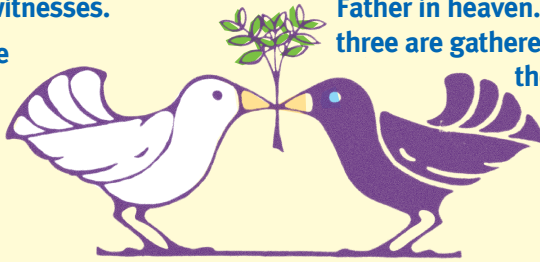
JESUS 1: If another member of the church, a brother or sister, sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained him or her. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

JESUS 2: If the member refuses to listen to

them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven. And whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

JESUS 3: Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.

Matthew 18.15-20



Jesus calls us to take action against wrong.

Sunday's gospel is part of Jesus' discourse on how he wants his disciples to live together. These sayings which Matthew collects in chapter 18 anticipate life in the community of disciples after Jesus' death and resurrection and reflect practices in the early church.

Only Matthew uses the word *church* to refer to the Christian community. The word, *ekklesia* in Greek, appears twice—first when Jesus tells Peter, “Upon this rock I will build my church,” referring to Peter's faith and second when Jesus challenges the community to reach out to its sinners in Sunday's gospel. The word means the *assembly* or *gathering*, the members of the Christian community.

“Talk it through” is the nub of Jesus' advice on what to do when one disciple wrongs another. In Matthew's gospel Jesus outlines a process that draws on a law from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy. The law requires two or three witnesses in order for a person to make an accusation (19.15). The witnesses protect an individual from the accusations of a malicious enemy or from a leader who wants to get rid of an opponent. The gospel process builds on this law. It requires speaking directly and honestly and listening attentively.

In step one the wronged person talks to the brother or

sister when they are alone. Face-to-face, one-on-one dialogue is the ideal way to understand one another.

If this first step doesn't work, the gospel process tells the wronged person to bring witnesses along for a second face-to-face talk. If they are ignored, the matter should be brought to the church community as a whole.

The aim of the process is not to settle a dispute but to win over an offending community member. The process adds more and more voices to persuade him or her to change the behavior and seek reconciliation.

Even the final step when a wrongdoer ignores the church aims at conversion rather than punishment. “Treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector,” Jesus says. But he himself reached out to Gentiles and tax collectors rather than avoid them.

- What value do you put on face-to-face conversation for clearing up a wrong or supposed wrong?
- What has worked for you to stop the spread of accusations on social media?
- How do political memes online affect you? What is one you remember and value?

Immediately before Sunday's gospel Jesus asks, “If a shepherd has 100 sheep and one has gone astray, does the shepherd not leave the ninety-nine and search for the one?” Jesus stands with the shepherd on the mercy side. He urges the church to search for strays, reach out to the excluded, and reconcile with wrongdoers.



But there is no mistaking that the church community has authority to act with regard to wrongdoing. What the community does lasts. “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven,” Jesus declares. In other words, the community can impose and lift obligations, exclude or readmit members, with confidence that it is acting in accordance with God’s will.

More than that, Jesus insists his followers can count on the power of praying and gathering together. When two or three seek counsel in prayer or when two or three gather in his name, they act as church. They will find Jesus in their midst in decision making.

● **Why do grudges last? What heals them?**

● **How has prayer in small groups helped you or others reconcile wrongs?**

Jesus’ advice urges us to win over wrongdoers whenever two or three of his disciples gather. If they fail to stop their harmful activity, we can oblige them to go away. We don’t have to tolerate abusive individuals

or allow them to carry on their harmful activities in our midst.

It also seems reasonable to assume that this process pertains to groups and organizations or institutions that are doing wrong as well as to individuals. In short, Sunday’s gospel is really an instruction about individual and community action to correct wrongdoing and injustice.

How much festering resentment and ill will can we avoid if we speak directly with people or organizations who wrong us—not to chide or scold but to let them know how we feel and how we are affected by what they are doing? How often might such frank conversation surprise both us and the offenders by leading to greater mutual understanding, apologies, and forgiveness?

Above all, we must never forget that the power to exclude a brother or sister, a group, or an organization is not the power to

condemn or avenge. Judgment and vengeance belong to God alone. The binding or loosing Jesus empowers us to do is not for punishing but for healing. We are not inquisitors or vigilantes. One-upping hateful political messages can turn us into haters.

Jesus’ disciples have a duty and authority to act against wrongdoing and injustice. We need not wait for “powers that be” to make life on this earth better. We can join our voices to pray for change and we can act carefully for justice, with guidance from Jesus himself who is in our midst.

● **What wrongs or conflicts does Jesus’ instruction urge you to act upon?**

In restorative justice circles victims and offenders speak face to face. Mary Lou Menikheim describes a successful conference:

The other facilitator and I had difficulty scheduling a first meeting with the victim of damage a group of youths caused at a construction site of her company. Our requests to meet in the late afternoon irritated her until I explained that we were both volunteers and had other full time jobs outside the court system.

Her attitude changed from hostile to accommodating. When we met with the young offender, the sole accountable youth who had created

DO SOMETHING

CHARITY

JUSTICE

● Learn about training in restorative justice, which brings perpetrators and victims face to face for reconciliation with each other.

significant damage in the model home at the construction site, he apologized and took responsibility for his and the other boys' damage.

The construction company owner was taken by the youth's accountability and his story of struggle with drugs and the death from overdose of his close friend. Significant healing and understanding ensued.

The company owner offered the youth a job under the guidance of the company's foreman, thus giving the youth an opportunity to earn money to pay for the damage in the model home.

Through the Restorative Justice process, one young man was turned away from a court record and life of delinquency by the one-to-one conversation with the person harmed. The victim was made whole and the community gained a positive contributing member.

● **What small bit of hostility can you remove from the world?**

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For Christians, action for justice is essential.

Sunday's first reading from the prophet Ezekiel shows that Jesus' teaching about communal correction builds on a long tradition of belief that God's prophets and God's people have a duty to speak out against wickedness and to try to turn wrongdoers from their ways. The reading also brings to mind a statement from *Justice in the World*, a document issued by the 1971 Synod of Bishops:

"Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation."

Warn the wicked.

The word of God came to Ezekiel: So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me.

If I say to the wicked, "O wicked ones, you shall surely die," and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand.

But if you warn the wicked to turn from their ways, and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life.

Ezekiel 33:7-9

● **What injustices in your neighborhood or civic community do individuals and groups need to work together to correct?**

PRAY

Take a few moments to consider what Sunday's scriptures are asking of you. What festering feelings have you left unspoken? What wrong have you left unsaid when it might perhaps be easily corrected? What commitment do you want to make to work with a group to construct a strong civic community?

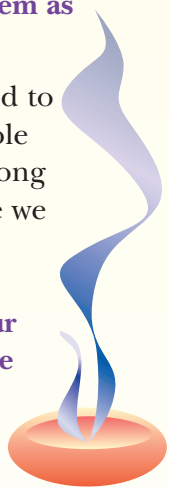
LEADER: We ask a blessing on all those we love and those who love us.

ALL: We ask a blessing on our neighbors and commit ourselves to love them as we love ourselves.

LEADER: We ask God to bless and make whole those who do us wrong or who wrong those we love.

ALL: We commit ourselves to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

Exchange a sign of peace.



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