

By Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Place a lighted candle at the center of your group. Pray for peace using the readings below from four world religions.

READER 1: In the book of Numbers 6.22-26, the Holy One says to Moses, "Bless the Israelites. Say to them: The Holy One bless and keep you! God's face shine upon you with graciousness! The Holy One look upon you kindly and give you peace!"

READER 2: In the Holy Quran of Islam (Surah 5.8) it says: O all ye who believe! Stand out firmly for Allah! Stand as witnesses to fair dealings, and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just; justice is next to piety; and revere Allah! For Allah is well acquainted with all that ye do!

READER 3: From the words of the Buddha (Dhammapada 1.5, 17.3, 149-150): Hatreds do not ever cease in this world by hating but by love. This is an eternal truth. Overcome anger by love, overcome evil by good. Overcome the miser by giving, overcome the liar by truth.

READER 4: *World Peace Prayer* from the Hindu *Upanishads*: Lead us from death to life, from falsehood to truth, from despair to hope, from fear to trust. Lead us from hate to love, from war to peace; let peace fill our hearts, let peace fill our world, let peace fill our universe.

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

As an advocate to end the death penalty, Helen Prejean, CSJ, is living Sunday's gospel, which proclaims that unlimited forgiveness is the foundation of God's reign. A Sister of St. Joseph, Sister Helen titles her recent autobiography *River of Fire*. The fire is God. The river is the Mississippi, part of life in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where she grew up and in New Orleans, where she served.

When the Second Vatican Council turned the Catholic Church toward the modern world and toward solidarity with the poor and afflicted, Helen turned with it. She heard the message, "Integral to the good news is the poor are to be poor no longer."

The phrase haunted her until she moved with other

sisters into the St. Thomas housing project in New Orleans and worked at Hope House. One day a woman from the Prison Coalition asked her to write to an inmate on death row.

To Helen's surprise Patrick Sonnier wrote back. Eventually she visited him. Matthew 25 includes visiting the prisoner as a work of mercy. She became his spiritual advisor.

"The currents in the river carry us out of our lagoons," Helen says of her work. "Grace comes as we need it."

Dead Man Walking, the book, the film, and the opera, tells the story of Helen's journey with Sonnier to his execution for the murder of a young couple. Step by step her relationship

with Sonnier reorients her life. She becomes the face of Christ for him at his execution. When she leaves the prison, she throws up.

Sister Helen has advocated against the death penalty and accompanied six prisoners to their executions. She is currently



Sister Joan and Sister Helen

accompanying a seventh. On August 2, 2018, the Catholic Church amended its Catechism to stand against the death penalty “under any circumstances.” The human person has more worth than the worst mistake of his life, Helen insists.

Lloyd La Blanc, the father of the young woman Sonnier killed, taught Helen the regenerating power of forgiveness. He reached out to her, seeking help to forgive the man that killed his daughter. Killing the killer did not bring her back to life. Anger was making victims of Lloyd and his family. He and Helen prayed together and became friends. Mercy is more Godlike than vengeance, she says.

● **What is the power of forgiveness in your experience?**

GOSPEL

How many times shall we forgive?



NARRATOR: Peter came and asked Jesus this question.

PETER: Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?

JESUS: Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy times seven. For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him 10,000 talents was brought to him. As he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. The servant fell on his knees before him.

SERVANT: Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.

JESUS: Out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But that same servant, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him 100 denarii and seized him by the throat.

SERVANT: Pay what you owe.

JESUS: His fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him.

SECOND SERVANT: Have patience with me, and I will pay you.

JESUS: But he refused; instead he threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed. They reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him.

MASTER: You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?

JESUS: In anger his master handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

Matthew 18.21-35

Forgiving is the ethic of God's reign.

by Bill Moore

How can the servant who has his own debt forgiven turn around and throttle a fellow servant who owes him far less. Why doesn't he forgive as he has been forgiven? Why inflict a punishment he has pleaded not to receive?

Forgiveness was not the normal thing in the merciless servant's world. Putting a debtor in prison or selling a family into slavery

were customary ways to settle accounts. The king's change of heart was astoundingly abnormal. He didn't just give the servant time to pay him back. He wrote off the debt—completely!

So the servant's treatment of his fellow servant becomes unfair only in light of the king's extraordinary mercy. That's the parable's message: Things have changed—drastically! The reign

of God turns things inside out, backwards, and upside down.

Those who wish to live in this kingdom must treat those who owe them or who have offended them very differently than before. Mercy and forgiveness, not payback and punishment, are now the norm. Pope Francis describes the mercy of God as “the beating heart of the gospel” (*Amoris Laetitia*, On Love in the Family, #295).



● **Who has forgiven you? Whom have you failed to forgive?**

● **If you knew you were going to die tomorrow, whom would you forgive? From whom would you seek forgiveness?**

Forgiving is not easy. Peter clearly has a problem with Jesus' message of forgiveness. He tries to find out how much is enough — "Seven times?" But Jesus refuses to acknowledge a boundary: "Not seven times. I say seventy times seven times." In other words, "Don't bother counting." No matter how often he forgives, Peter will never be able to say he has forgiven his brother enough.

Neither will we. In our personal lives and in our social and economic dealings, we must become perpetually forgiving people.

It's hard to let go of what others owe us, hard to give up the sense of being wronged and the desire to be compensated. Like Peter, we want to count. How else can we be sure we won't run out of the love and comfort we need?

The parable is about us, not about God. The unforgiving servant's terrible fate is meant to

startle us into recognizing how urgently we need to change our treatment of those who offend us.

God's reign is coming—is indeed already here! There's no time to lose. Hurry up! Show mercy. Forgive your sister, your brother, your co-worker and your neighbor from your heart. Now!

● **How does it feel to forgive someone? To be forgiven? Which is harder: To ask forgiveness, accept forgiveness, or grant forgiveness?**

Relationships take time to build. In *Amoris Laetitia*, On Love in the Family, Pope Francis builds on St. John Paul II's concept of gradualness, which recognizes the human person "knows, loves, and accomplishes moral good by different stages of growth" (#295).

Pope Francis explains "there is a need to accompany with mercy and patience the eventual stages of personal growth as these progressively appear," making room for 'the Lord's mercy, which spurs us to do our best' (#295).

● **How do you make room for grace and growth in your relationships?**

As citizens we experienced the rush to war after nine eleven. Today we know the cost in human lives on all sides.

Think of the negative energy that demonizing and one-upping opponents generates. Think of the power for good that we generate each time we forgive. Think of the virtuous cycle of solidarity and constructive action for justice that we set in motion.

Jim Hightower, the political humorist from Texas, loves to repeat the "political philosophy" he learned from his daddy who learned it from his daddy: "We all do better when we all do better."

Why not fashion a society and culture where forgiveness is the order of the day? And how many more people might do better economically if God's abundant generosity, rather than managed scarcity and market magic, was the guiding idea of our economy?

At the very least, employers throughout the world might meet basic labor standards and respect workers' rights. Immigrant workers everywhere might be treated fairly, and people on unemployment or welfare wouldn't be stigmatized and made to jump through hoops to qualify for crumbs.

● **When has a raise or a bonus made a big difference in your life?**

● **In your dealings, are you generous like God or more exacting like Scrooge?**

Sirach teaches us to let in God's healing.

The wise scholar Ben Sirach understood that letting go of wrath and anger and desire for revenge—hateful as they are—is no easy thing. The impulse to nourish anger and cherish wrath is strong. Starved for love and unconscious that we are much loved, we will embrace even hatred, if we feel it is our only friend.

But Sirach also knew that setting enmity aside, forgiving our neighbor's injustice, and overlooking faults are the only ways to let in the love that surrounds us and receive God's healing and pardon for our own sins.

Sirach hopes the thought of God's covenant would most surely move his readers to abandon their preoccupation with their neighbor's faults. The Most High's persistent, insistent commitment to the people of Israel, never shaken by their repeated turning away, demonstrated as nothing else the unbounded depth and breadth of God's love for them. Pardon if you want to be pardoned, Sirach taught; you can do it, if you remember that you are loved.

Forgive if you want pardon.

Anger and wrath, these also are abominations, yet a sinner holds on to them.

The vengeful will face God's vengeance, for God keeps a strict account of their sins. Forgive your neighbor the wrong your neighbor has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray. Does anyone harbor anger against another, and expect healing from God? If people have no mercy toward others like themselves, can they then seek pardon for their own sins?

If mere mortals harbor wrath, who will make an atoning sacrifice for their sins? Remember the end of your life, and set enmity aside; remember corruption and death, and be true to the commandments. Remember the commandments, and do not be angry with your neighbor; remember the covenant of the Most High, and overlook faults.

Sirach 27.30—28.7

- What do you regard as the least and most forgivable sins? How do your thoughts compare with Sirach's?
- What teachings does Sirach agree with in Sunday's gospel?

PRAY

To conclude your reflection on Sunday's gospel, pray together about our public concerns.

LEADER: Let us pray for the integrity and safety of our legislators.

ALL: Teach us the common good, God of us all.

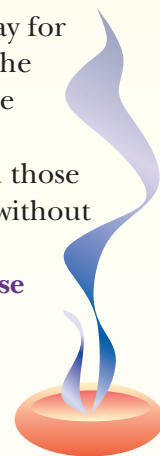
LEADER: Let us pray for families left without loved ones, without jobs, without homes during the pandemic, without peace.

ALL: Teach us compassion and mercy, merciful God.

LEADER: Let us pray for the powerful and the powerless, for those who are hopeless without power and those who are powerful without conscience.

ALL: Teach us to use power to give life.

Exchange a sign of peace.



Bill Moore holds MA degrees in Philosophy, Theology, and Adult Education

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.

CHARITY

JUSTICE

DO SOMETHING

● Invite neighbors of other faiths to teach you ways they practice their religion. Visit a local synagogue, mosque, or temple. Join or support interfaith groups in your area.

Sunday by Sunday
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