

By Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Open a bible at the center of your group and light a candle or votive light beside it.

LEADER: Sometimes we see the world around us with gratitude, sometimes with envy at what others have.

ALL: Bless our eyes, Creator God, for seeing our lives and our world as your gift.

LEADER: Sometimes we hear brooks bubbling and birds warbling; sometimes, destructive words about friends and foes.

ALL: Bless our ears to keep others' trust and discern truth.

LEADER: Sometimes we touch with love, sometimes with blame and hate.

ALL: Bless our hands for care and compassion.

LEADER: Sometimes we smell a fresh breeze or apple blossoms, sometimes exhaust from the car ahead or the acrid odor of our garbage and pollution.

ALL: Bless our noses to remind us to do our part in caring for Earth.

LEADER: Let us never lose our taste for the nourishing Word of God.

ALL: Nor the Bread of Life. Amen.

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

Messaging and social media today often substitute for talking. It's the instant way to keep up with friends and family members. Someone dies or gets well after cancer surgery, we message. Someone wants to know who came to the party last night. They text and ask.

My niece has messaged a photo of her daughter with the orange tabby kitty like the one we just had to put to sleep. Sweet. I also find a cartoon labeled "Mom, the original seat belt," a harried mother with her arm slung across a surprised passenger—and a photo of a field of yellow daisies from a cousin traveling in Sicily.



I love keeping up online, family photos of trips and sports. But political and religious posts often rant and ridicule. Then I wish people posted in their own words and reasons rather than hide behind someone else's cruel cartoons or mistaken facts. Others might understand the experience our views express.

We humans are social beings. From birth we only flourish with others' care and we only develop our gifts and identity by interacting with family, friends, coworkers. It's no wonder we like to chat when we fill our water bottles at the drinking fountain.

Often, for better and worse, we make other people's business our own. That's the skivvy in Nazareth in Sunday's gospel. People are talking about Jesus. They hear about his miracles and the way he talks like a prophet.

Neighbors think Jesus is crazy. His family takes the clue to intervene. Mary, and his brothers, and sisters go to talk to Jesus directly.

● **What have you done that people at first judged as crazy?**

GOSPEL

Who belongs to Jesus' family?

NARRATOR: Jesus went home and again a crowd gathered, so they could not even eat. When his relatives heard this, they went to restrain him, for people were saying—

ALL: He is out of his mind.

NARRATOR: Scribes from Jerusalem said—

SCRIBES: He has Beelzebul, and by the rule of the demons he casts out demons.

NARRATOR: Jesus called the scribes to him and spoke to them in parables.

JESUS 1: How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. If Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come.

JESUS 2: No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered. Amen, I say to you, all sins and all blasphemies that people utter will be forgiven them. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.

NARRATOR: For the scribes said—

SCRIBES: He has an unclean spirit.

NARRATOR: Then Jesus' mother and his brothers came. Standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him—

CROWD: Your mother and

brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.

JESUS: Who are my mother and my brothers?

NARRATOR: Jesus looked at those who sat around him, and said—

JESUS: Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.

Mark 3:20-35



Jesus gathers a family of faith.

Only Mark tells this story in which the enthusiastic crowds seeking Jesus out arouse fear for his safety and sanity in his mother, brothers, and sisters. Jesus seems to be the talk of Galilee. Christians down the centuries get a glimpse of Mary, an anxious mother, worried that such popularity will endanger her son.

What is Jesus saying that neighbors think he is out of his mind? Jesus goes from village to village teaching in synagogues.

He proclaims that he brings the kingdom of God near. He speaks with an authority that amazes hearers.

What is Jesus doing? On the first Sabbath after he calls disciples, he frees a man of an unclean spirit and then heals Peter's mother-in-law the same morning. That evening the whole city gathers at his door and he heals the sick and casts out demons.

After that busy day, Jesus goes from village to village preaching and healing. He heals a leper

who spreads the news. He forgives a paralyzed man's sins and only commands him to walk after scribes challenge him.

Jesus eats with sinners and tax-collectors who don't keep the religious laws. Jesus breaks the law himself by picking grain and healing on the Sabbath. Shortly before his family becomes alarmed, people from all over Israel come in such numbers that Jesus teaches them from a boat.

● **What does Jesus show us about God in his words and actions?**

● **When has a child worried you as Jesus worries his mother?**

Jesus' family appears at the first part of Sunday's gospel and the last. In between scribes from Jerusalem accuse Jesus of healing and casting out demons by the power of Beelzebul. The *Dictionary of the Bible* suggests Beelzebul is a contemptuous name for an ancient god, like lord of the flies. Showing himself an able debater, Jesus counters, "How can Satan cast out Satan?"

Four parables follow to refute the scribes' charge. Three repeat Jesus' argument: A divided kingdom cannot stand. A house divided against itself cannot stand. If Satan is divided against himself, his end has come.

A fourth parable observes that a strong man must be tied up before a thief can plunder his house. Jesus is untying people from Satan's hold. The Spirit, not Satan, drives Jesus into the desert and into healing and freeing people.

Finally, Jesus addresses his accusers directly, warning them that God forgives every sin except blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. To resist the urgings of the Spirit is to reject God and make forgiveness impossible.

The Spirit is the giver of our lives, our senses for perceiving God in creation and our minds and hearts for discerning God's presence in our experience. Jesus wants the scribes to recognize that he comes from God.

● **How trusting of God's forgiveness and mercy are you?**

● **How do you strive to pay attention to the Spirit of God in your life?**

When Jesus' mother and brothers get to his house, they stay outside and ask for him. Rather than come out, Jesus asks those sitting with him inside the house, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" The scene makes outsiders of Jesus' family and insiders of his followers.

Just before Sunday's gospel passage, Jesus appointed twelve apostles to do what he does—to proclaim his message and cast out demons. Some in this inner circle may be sitting with Jesus inside his house.

The gospel says a crowd is sitting around Jesus as he redefines who belongs to his family. "Those who do the will of God are brother, sisters, and mother to me," he says. By this definition all can belong to Jesus' faith family, including his blood family, the scribes, the seekers.

● **What do you appreciate about family as an image of Church?**

● **When have you appreciated other believers as brothers and sisters?**

Was Jesus an only child?

The answer is no one knows. The New Testament does not identify the brothers and sisters mentioned in Sunday's gospel as without a doubt Jesus' blood siblings of the same parents. As early as the second century Christians began thinking of them as stepsiblings—children of Joseph by a previous marriage or cousins. The Roman Catholic theological position is that Mary remained a virgin throughout her life.

DO SOMETHING



- **Investigate Blessings in a Backpack for children in your area, a program that helps provide food on weekends for children in food insecure homes in 44 states and requires volunteer support and donations. To feed one child for the 38 weekends of the school year takes \$150.**

Humans learn through experience what is good.

Like most peoples, the Israelites have creation stories in their sacred scriptures. Genesis 2 contains the Yahwist creation story and Genesis 3 the story of humans' first and failed choice, the temptation story.

Sometime after David unified the 12 tribes of Israel into a kingdom about 1000 B.C., a person whom scholars call the Yahwist collected and wrote down the ancient stories the tribes of Israel told at feasts and holy places down the centuries. Stories in this tradition refer to God as Yahweh, the divine name God reveals to Moses. English translates the name as *Lord God*. A second collection of stories refers to God as *Elohim*, in English *God*.

Sunday's first reading takes place after the man and woman have eaten the forbidden fruit and are hiding. The Lord God seeks them out. The woman has no name yet in the story. The name *Adam* simply means the *human*.

The man and woman break the Lord God's command not to eat from the tree in the middle of the garden. They both eat the appealing fruit the serpent claims will make them immortal like God. Their choice to eat expresses the truth that humans are free.

Who is to blame becomes the question in Sunday's reading. The man blames the woman. The woman insists the serpent tricked her. The Lord God punishes the serpent and promises enmity between its offspring and the woman's. Jesus is the woman's offspring who is freeing people from demons. Today we might understand demons as destructive compulsions, such as alcohol, nicotine, hoarding, shopping, chocolates, overwork, money.

Adam and Eve didn't lose paradise for the rest of us. They are us. We humans learn through experience what is good and what is evil. Our moral traditions help us.

Who Is to Blame?

After the man had eaten of the tree, the Lord God called to the human and asked him. "Where are you?" The man answered, "I heard you in the garden, but I was afraid, because I was naked, so I hid myself."

Then the Lord God asked, "Who told you that you were naked? You have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat." The man replied, "The woman whom you put here with me—she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate it."

The Lord God then said to the woman, "Why did you do such a thing?" The woman answered, "The serpent tricked me, so I ate it."

The Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures. Upon your belly you

shall go, and dust you shall eat, all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel."

Genesis 3.9-15

- What helps you resist your demons, the drives that threaten to possess you?
- What do you learn about human nature from this story?

PRAY

Conclude your reflection together with prayer.

LEADER: Spirit, giver of life, you welcome us into the human family.

ALL: You animate our community of faith.

LEADER: You forgive our brokenness.

ALL: You accept us as people who make mistakes.

LEADER: Spirit, you move in us and all that is.

ALL: We move in you.

LEADER: You drive us to keep on trying.

ALL: Together our love in action spins webs of friendship, belonging, and commitment.

Amen.

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, St. Paul, MN.

