

SUNDAY by SUNDAY

by Therese Sherlock, CSJ

Open a bible, light a candle beside it, and gather your group. Place a church bulletin on the table. Consider briefly: What does belonging to my parish community mean to me? What questions does being a churchgoer raise for me? Name your feelings aloud, and state any questions you have. Pray together:

LEADER: Holy God, our sustainer, direct our steps in our everyday efforts.

ALL: May the changing moods of our human hearts never blind us to you, the source of every good.

LEADER: Faith gives us the promise of peace and makes known the demands of love.

ALL: Remove the selfishness that blurs the vision of faith. Sustain us in serving others. Amen.

Who was your favorite teacher? What makes you remember this teacher as important to you? My friend Dave told me about a teacher he had in eighth grade—Mrs. Fraser. Her students all thought she was ancient when she was teaching them, but she didn't die until Dave and his class were in their mid-30s.

Many of them attended Mrs. Fraser's wake. After paying their respects at the casket and greeting her children, they gathered in a corner to visit. They shared stories about Mrs. Fraser, mostly about how strict she was and how demanding in her assignments.

Dylan had been one of the toughest guys in their eighth grade of only 26 kids. Seeing Dylan at the wake surprised my friend. They were laughing about ways they got around Mrs. Fraser's rules when Dylan pulled his wallet out of his pocket.

"I know she was a hard teacher," he said, "but on the last day of class, when we were

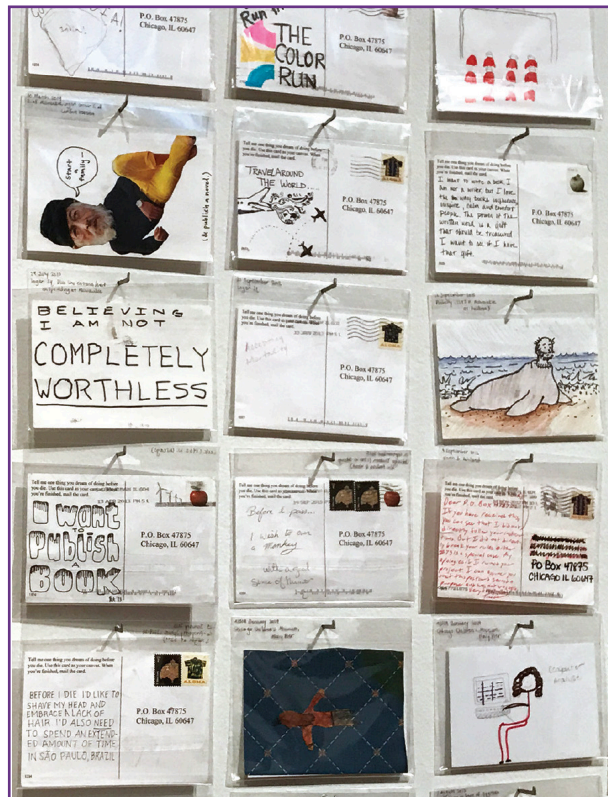
cleaning out our desks and lockers, she gave me this." He unfolded a worn piece of paper. "She told me there were five great things about me that she wanted me to always remember. I'm not going to read them to you, but it meant a lot to me that she saw some good in me."

After a moment Alisa opened her purse and unzipped a small pocket inside it. Her worn piece of paper looked like Dylan's. "She gave me a list, too," Alisa said. "I read it when I am having a hard time. I'll tell you one thing she wrote: 'You are brave, Alisa.'"

One by one Mrs. Fraser's 30-something students took out their folded papers and spoke about what her recognition of their good qualities had meant to them.

Dave thought the saying her children chose to place beneath her photo was perfect: "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle."

● Who has been Mrs. Fraser to you?



Postcard responses to the question: What is one thing you dream of doing before you die? Display in the Chicago Cultural Center.

GOSPEL

Jesus teaches a new order.

NARRATOR: Jesus spoke to the crowd and his disciples.

JESUS 1: The scribes and the Pharisees have succeeded Moses as teachers. Therefore, do everything and observe everything they tell you. But do not follow their example. Their words are bold, but their deeds are few.

JESUS 2: They bind up heavy loads, hard to carry, to lay on other people's shoulders, while they themselves will not lift a finger to budge them.

JESUS 3: All their works are performed to be seen. They widen their phylacteries and wear huge tassels. They are fond of places of honor at banquets and the front seats in synagogues, of marks of respect in public and of being called rabbi.



JESUS 1: As for you, avoid the title rabbi. One among you is your teacher, the rest are learners.

JESUS 2: Do not call anyone on earth your father. Only one is your father, the One in heaven.

JESUS 3: Avoid being called teachers. Only one is your teacher, the Messiah.

ALL: The greatest among you will be the one who serves the rest. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, but those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Matthew 23:1-12

Scholars today urge more sympathy for the Pharisees. Individual Pharisees may be hypocrites but as a group they are the village religion teachers of Jesus' time. They help the people understand what the Law of Moses asks of them in their daily lives. They believe in updating the law through examining cases and setting new precedents to fit present situations.

As a reforming teacher, Jesus is more like the Pharisees than any other religious group. He, too, is a teacher of the people. So why such harsh words for them?

Matthew hears in Jesus' words an important message for Christians of the A.D. 80s. Some must be claiming more importance than others in the house churches in which the early communities gathered. Perhaps roles are creating rank in the household of Christ.

More than 50 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, the early ideals of sharing goods and extending hospitality in mutual love have perhaps dimmed. Christians face the future without the temple and without Jesus' first eyewitness leaders. Jesus' words remind them that teachers and leaders in Jesus' household are servants of all, not higher ranking officials.

The responsibility of witnessing to Jesus' good news goes not just to a few but to all in the pew. Our lives, not just our words, must teach.

● **How did you learn to be a good Catholic?**

Who is greatest among Christians?

Jesus continues to teach in the temple courts, no longer confronting temple officials or other teachers but talking to his own disciples. Jesus praises the scribes and Pharisees with a critical twist. "Do and observe everything they tell you," Jesus urges his disciples, because these teachers of the law occupy the seat of Moses. He then adds a big BUT. "But do not follow their example. They do not practice what they preach."

Commonly Christians stereotype the scribes and Pharisees as the bad guys in the gospels. Passages such as Sunday's gospel feed their reputation for hypocrisy. Throughout Matthew's

chapter 23, Jesus criticizes Pharisees, calling them "blind guides" and "whited sepulchers." It's a chapter of warnings aimed at those who love being first, being praised, being important.

The warnings take the literary form of woes. A woe is the opposite of a beatitude. A beatitude begins, "Blessed are the..." and then describes who is blessed in God's eyes. A woe indicts, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, blind guides, who lock people out of the kingdom." A contemporary example might be, "Woe to you, ecologists, who drive to work when you could easily take the bus."



A mosaic honors the apostle Paul in Berea near Thessalonika in Greece.

● What does how you live teach others about being a follower of Jesus?

At this point in his gospel, Matthew is readying hearers for the last judgment. The early Christians who identify with both their Jewish identity and their fidelity to Jesus’ teaching must decide what they need to hold on to and what they can let go.

Today we ask the same question. Over 20 centuries the Church has evolved as an institution with roles, robes, and ranks. Yet our model is Jesus Christ, who identifies with the least and washes his friends’ feet before his last supper as a servant. In concluding Sunday’s gospel, Jesus calls us to humble service, not station and status. In the community that gathers in Jesus’ name, the greatest serve the rest; the humble are exalted.

The Second Vatican Council recognized that baptism calls every Christian to holiness and to live the mission of Jesus in the world. The bishops of the council affirm that “Christian Tradition makes progress in the world not only through the teaching of the bishops who succeed the apostles but through the prayer and pondering in our hearts of every believer and through our experience of spiritual realities” (*Dei Verbum* #8).

As may have happened with Matthew’s community, the ideals of Vatican II have dimmed—but interest in national and diocesan synods is a sign of growing willingness among the people of God to take responsibility for Jesus’ message to our world. Pope Francis seeks to involve the people of God in the work of the Church.

● How does rank or privilege insulate you from wider experience of the whole people of God?

● How have you participated in synod preparation in your parish and diocese? What are your hopes for the synod process in the Church?

In Sunday’s second reading, Paul describes himself as the mother of the Christian community at Thessalonika.

“While we were among you, we were as gentle as any nursing mother fondling her little ones. So well disposed were we toward you, in fact, that we wanted to share with you not only God’s tidings but our very

lives, you had become so dear to us” (1 Thessalonians 2.7). This mother image expresses Paul’s total commitment to those he has given birth in Christ.

In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus cautions against calling anyone but God, father. Apparently, the father image in Matthew’s time, as in our time, carries not only the association of care and commitment but of authority and headship. Paul and this Sunday’s gospel speak against a hierarchy of roles in the Christian community and for equality and mutual service.

The Lenten fish suppers in our parish help us see one another serving. The man who trains altar servers also supervises the coffee pots. A man whose grandmother



taught him how to make pies makes a dozen for the Friday night events. An experienced core group fries the fish. Kids wind napkins around silverware. Jesus’ whole message is to serve each other. People’s willingness to serve lights the way to the God we are seeking.

● What has sustained you in the practice of serving others? What has deterred you?

DO SOMETHING

CHARITY **JUSTICE**

● Write a letter of thanks to a person in authority whom you respect for his or her hard work and involvement with the poor.

Malachi excoriates temple leaders.

The name Malachi means *my messenger*. In Sunday's first reading, this prophet addresses the priests who lead the Jewish community that has returned from 70 years of exile in Babylon. The time is around 500 B.C. Like Jesus in Sunday's gospel, Malachi indicts those whose teaching should serve the community. He accuses them of breaking the covenant and treating some with partiality.

These leaders who suffered exile have returned only to make some of their own suffer. Those who endured Babylonian domination have returned to Jerusalem only to experience priestly domination. The leaders' example gives scandal.

Why do we break faith with one another?

I am a great King, says the Lord of hosts, and my name will be feared among the nations. If you will not lay it to heart to give glory to my name, says the Lord of hosts, then I will send a curse upon you and I will curse your blessings; yes, I have already cursed them because you do not lay it to heart.

You have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by your instruction. You have made void the covenant of Levi, says the Lord of hosts, and so I have made you contemptible and base before all the people. You have not kept my ways but have shown partiality in your decisions.

Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? Why then do we break faith with each other, violating the covenant of our ancestors?

Malachi 1.14; 2.2,8-10

Shortly after Malachi, the priest and scribe Ezra becomes the teacher of the people who are trying to rebuild the temple and themselves as a community. He teaches these Israelites who grew up in Babylon the story of God's saving acts on Israel's behalf. Jewish tradition regards Ezra as a second Moses. With his teaching, the people renew the covenant relationship their ancestors made with God.

- How have you experienced people breaking faith with you?
- How might a renewed awareness that we have one God change our world?

PRAY

Take some time to consider the needs of our Church and our world for servant leaders. Name these needs aloud. Respond to each prayer with words from the gospel.

ALL: The greatest among us serve the rest.

LEADER: Together let us say this poem from Tagore, the great poet and 1913 Nobel Laureate from India:

ALL: I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and BEHOLD, service was JOY.



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