

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Place an open bible and lighted candle on a table at the center of your group. Pray together the following questions from James 2.14-18, Sunday's second reading.

LEADER: What good is it to profess faith without practicing it?

ALL: Such faith has no power to save one, has it?

LEADER: If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and no food for the day and you say, "Good-bye and good luck! Keep warm and well fed!"—

ALL: What good is that? Help us recognize the good we can do.



The young women arrive shy, withdrawn, burdened with no self-esteem and no education. Sister Rosemary and the other sisters offer them kindness and never pressure the women to tell their stories.

"I must be present," Sister Rosemary reflects. "I am called to teach the Gospel of Presence. You

cannot teach them if you are not present. If you want to talk about forgiveness, you must walk with them side by side."

Sister Rosemary recalls asking a child mother what she thought about forgiving rebels. "She told me, 'Sister, I want them to be forgiven so that we all get peace.' Her words touched me so deeply. I said, 'Who am I? I have not gone through all the pain this girl has gone through, (Crossfire broke her jaw and maimed her face.) And yet she is saying we should forgive. I learned a big lesson from her.'

"These girls have taught me the real meaning of forgiveness and love," says Sister Rosemary. "They have taught me how to be resilient and have helped me to value my vocation. We share our lives with people from both sides of the conflict."

soldiers had looted and damaged. Here Sister Rosemary heard her second call. Once the school began to welcome child mothers, more came—hundreds.

For 25 years until 2000, Joseph Kony and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) terrorized Uganda. Girls as young as ten were kidnapped to become wives or sex slaves to the soldiers and bore their children. Some were forced to train as soldiers and even kill family members—or be killed.

Child mothers who escaped found their families were dead or unwilling to accept them and their bush children. "I am called to give my life for these vulnerable people," Sister Rosemary explains, "and I must accept the way of the cross they walk."

"My call is a call within other calls," says Sister Rosemary Nyirumbe. *Time* named her one of its 100 most influential people in the world in 2014 for her healing work with abducted girls and their children at St. Monica's Vocational School in Gulu, Uganda.

God's first call brought Rosemary to the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Not quite 20 when she made vows, she worked in clinics, learned to close after surgeries, and deliver babies. She served in northern Uganda and South Sudan.

In 2001, her community sent Sister Rosemary to St. Monica's. Once a thriving high school for 300, the school by then served only 30 students in buildings

At St. Monica's the women learn vocational skills, such as tailoring and catering. "Right now we need to rebuild people's lives," says Sister Rosemary. "People have been broken for so many years. We need to mend these lives, literally with a needle. That is why we say we are sewing hope. We are fixing lives with a needle and thread."

Like Sister Rosemary Jesus' disciples face a deeper call as he leads them toward Jerusalem and the threat of suffering and death.

- Who has called you to presence or to mending lives?
- What have you learned from them?

GOSPEL



Who do you say that I am?

NARRATOR 1: Jesus set out with his disciples for the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked his disciples this question—

JESUS: Who do people say that I am?

DISCIPLE 1: John the Baptist.

DISCIPLE 2: Elijah.

DISCIPLE 3: One of the prophets.

JESUS: Who do you say that I am?

PETER: You are the Messiah.

NARRATOR 1: Jesus sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

NARRATOR 2: Then Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the

scribes, and be put to death, and after three days rise again. Jesus said all this quite openly.

NARRATOR 3: Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. At this Jesus turned around, and looking at his disciples, rebuked Peter.

JESUS: Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.

NARRATOR 3: Jesus called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them—

JESUS: Those who want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

Mark 8.27-35



Jesus' disciples face a turning point.

Who do you say that I am?" Jesus finally calls the question in Sunday's gospel. It has been building for eight chapters in Mark's gospel, although the omniscient narrator lets us in on the answer in chapter one, verse one—Jesus is the messiah, the Son of God.

The disciples are the people whom Mark most fully characterizes in his gospel. They follow Jesus without hesitating when he calls them from their fishing nets, but they experience frequent fear, confusion, and astonishment, as they follow him during his ministry. In these disciples

Mark hopes his hearers see themselves.

From the first Sabbath morning when Jesus raises up Peter's mother-in-law and she begins to give her life to the new community, Jesus' disciples witness him work amazing signs. Jesus heals a leper, commands a paralyzed man to walk after forgiving his sins, casts out demons, stops a woman's flow of blood, raises up a girl near death.

The disciples successfully complete the mission Jesus sends them to do—heal people, free them from demons, and preach God's nearness as he does. Then they find

themselves without resources to feed the 5,000 people who follow Jesus.

The disciples accompany Jesus on his Gentile mission. In Tyre, he frees the daughter of the Syrophenician woman from an unclean spirit. In the region of the Ten Cities, he opens the ears of the man who is deaf and loosens his tongue. He feeds 4,000 Gentiles with a few loaves.

This miracle begins chapter eight, the midpoint in Mark's narrative and midterm for Jesus' disciples. Jesus' asks the ultimate question, "Who do you say that I am?"

- How do you respond to this question?

Just before Sunday's gospel Mark tells a four-verse, miracle story that suggests what is going on for Jesus' disciples in their faith journey. In the story Jesus has to try twice before he succeeds at opening the eyes of a blind man (8.22-26). After Jesus puts saliva on his eyes and lays hands on him, the blind man can see only blurry shapes—people that look like trees. Jesus lays hands on him a second time before his vision clears.

This two-stage miracle anticipates Sunday's gospel when Jesus asks his disciples directly, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter's clear, forthright answer seems right. "You are the messiah." Indeed the healing, freeing, life-giving signs Jesus works in Galilee point to him as the messiah.

At this midpoint in their faith journey, Jesus' disciples show us just how mistaken and self-serving our ideas of Jesus and God can be. Mark places Jesus' first prediction of his passion right after Peter's confession of faith. Peter vehemently rejects Jesus' prediction and reveals how blurry his vision of Jesus still is.

Peter's messiah does not

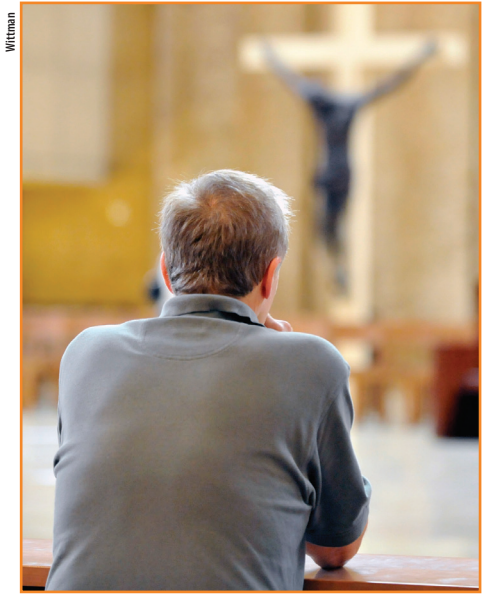
suffer, die, and rise. Peter has a popular notion of the messiah as an avenging warrior perhaps or a victorious restorer of Israel's fortunes among nations. Perhaps he has interpreted Jesus' talk about the reign of God as a political program.

● What popular ideas of Jesus have you outgrown?

Mark's gospel explores how the faith of Jesus' disciples matures. For all of us, faith develops across the life cycle. As children, our brains limit our understanding. As adolescents, we share the faith of our families, neighbors, and the church in which we grow up. Some of us never examine the faith we receive.

In Sunday's gospel Jesus predicts he will suffer and die at the hand of officials in Jerusalem and rise on the third day. Peter objects and clings to his popular warrior notion of who Jesus is. Only Jesus' death destroys Peter's received idea. Jesus' resurrection radically transforms his disciples' understanding.

The empty tomb is the ultimate threshold that invites Jesus' disciples to a profoundly new,



committed relationship with him, the crucified and risen one. It is this leap to which Mark calls his hearers.

The young adult years are critical to examining received faith and establishing a firm sense of self. Young adults often leave their church if they disagree with its teachings or stands on issues. Either/or thinking tends to rule. Today former Catholics are the second largest Christian denomination after Catholic. Parents lament their children leaving the Church after years of costly Catholic schooling. Homosexuality, women's ordination, same sex marriage are issues that lead young people to resist belonging to the Catholic Church.

Gradually some people grow able to hold tensions without resolving them. They welcome others' views, appreciate differences, and negotiate conflicts. Both-and replaces either-or thinking. In our polarized political and religious climate we badly need folks like this.

Jesus' disciples grow into this stage in the Acts of the Apostles. Conflicts with Jews who don't

DO SOMETHING



● Learn about the sewing, catering, and purse-making skills child mothers learn at St. Monica's Vocational School works to become able to support themselves. www.SewingHope.com.

● Read *Sewing Hope* by Reggie Whitten and Nancy Henderson about Sister Rosemary's ministry.

believe in Jesus and the willing faith of Gentiles transform them and broaden their mission.

Ultimately faith transforms us into the one we follow. We become other Christs, life-giving examples to people around us. Such disciples lose all self-serving interest and find themselves in giving themselves. Sister Rosemary is one such person. She finds resilience in helping child mothers forgive themselves and mend their lives.

● **Describe a turning point in your faith journey. What did you turn toward?**

Jesus' disciples keep growing after his death and resurrection. Peter, whose vision is blurry in Sunday's gospel and teary after he denies Jesus at his trial, later gives his life as a martyr during Nero's persecution of Christians in A.D. 64. Mark wants his hearers to recognize that fear and confusion can be the beginning of faith as it was for Peter.

For Mark, faith is a transforming, lifelong practice, not just an idea. As Jesus begins in the gospel to walk toward Jerusalem with his disciples following him, Mark tells us the way to follow in our turn—take up our crosses.

● **What crosses have you taken up? How has this self-giving changed you?**

● **What crosses should people take up? What self-sacrifice should we not expect of anyone?**

FIRST READING

Where is God in our suffering?

Sunday's first reading is one of three servant songs from Second Isaiah, the prophet who calls the Israelites in exile in Babylon to return home. In this prophetic poem God's servant accepts suffering because God is near and God vindicates. In the midst of enduring the consequences of the exile, this believer trusts God will keep Israel ultimately free from shame.

This prophecy is very contemporary in some ways. Liberation theology hears in the cry of oppressed people the voice of God in history. Their cries call for justice and reveal God's road.

In the 20th century, the Holocaust transformed many people's popular ideas of God and led them to see God as one who suffers with those who suffer. Solidarity with the oppressed opens ways to follow Jesus in our time.

A believer suffers.

The Lord God has opened my ear.

I did not rebel.

I did not run away.

I gave my back to those

who beat me, and my cheeks

to those who plucked my beard;

I did not hide my face

from insult and spitting.

The Lord God is my help,

therefore I am not disgraced;

I have set my face like flint,

knowing that I shall not be put to shame.

The one is near

who declares me innocent.

Who will contend with me?

Let us stand up together.

Who disputes my right?

Let them confront me.

The Lord God is my help;

who will prove me wrong?

Isaiah 50:5-9

● **How has solidarity with people who are oppressed transformed you?**

PRAY

Identify people you follow in the practice of Christian discipleship to use in the discipleship litany below.

LEADER: Jesus, you go before us on the way to Jerusalem and your death.

ALL: You go before us to Galilee after your resurrection.

LEADER: We will look for you on the road we travel.

ALL: We will find you on our way.

Group members take turns naming and saying a word about disciples who go before them. Respond to each.

ALL: Lead us on.

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