

By J. Michael Byron

Place a bible at the center of your group, and put the keys you carry with you near it or in front of you. Pray together.

LEADER: Anoint us, gracious God, with your Spirit.

ALL: Empower us to live lives of prophetic words and deeds.

LEADER: Create in us a desire to do justice,

ALL: To love tenderly,

LEADER: And to walk humbly with you

ALL: And with all of God's children of every race, creed, and color in a world where your peace and mercy reign. Amen.

TV commentator Andy Rooney was a fixture on CBS's "60 Minutes" show for years. While most journalists concern themselves with trivial topics like the economy or world politics, Rooney always tackled the tough ones like breakfast cereal and haircuts. The reflection I most vividly remember was a treatise about keys. Here's what he said:

There have been two keys on top of my dresser for 10 years now. I don't know what they're for, and I don't dare throw them away. Who knows? They may be important. I carry in my pocket a key ring with seven keys on it. Three of them are a mystery to me, but I don't put a key on the ring for no reason, so

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

obviously those keys open important places in my life. But where?

Rooney knew the human condition pretty well. That is one of the reasons he was so popular. After hearing his reflection on keys, I went to the top drawer of the desk that I have in my office. I found ten keys! One of them was even labeled "Inside Master," but I don't have any idea what building it's the inside master for. I'll bet I'm not the only person like that.

Keys—even the ones we can't find an immediate use for—are precious little pieces to us, because we have all been on the opposite end of that story, face to face with a locked door or locked trunk or suitcase or vehicle with no key to be found. There is a little voice inside of us that

keeps saying, "Throw this thing away now and you'll be kicking yourself later!"

Wouldn't it be nice if we began to value human beings with the same kind of reverence that we give to keys? If the thought of losing or casting aside people accidentally instilled in us the same kind of worry as do the same thoughts about keys? What would Andy Rooney sound like if we simply change the word *keys* and replace it with the words *human beings*? His thoughts would sound like this:

I carry with me seven human beings. Three of them are a mystery to me, but they aren't in my life for no reason, so obviously those human beings open important doors in my life. But where?

Who are forgotten keys in your life? What doors you wish to open again?



● When have you met someone who seemed at first only to be a burden to you, but who later turned out to be a blessing or a treasured friend? Talk about it.

GOSPEL

Jesus fulfills Israel's scriptures.

LUKE: Many have undertaken to arrange a narrative of the events that have been fulfilled among us, as they were delivered to us from the beginning by the eyewitnesses and ministers of the word. It has seemed good to me also, having accurately traced things from the first, to put in writing an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know with certainty about the instruction you have received.

NARRATOR 1: Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee. Word concerning him went out throughout the region. He taught in their synagogues, and all esteemed him.

NARRATOR 2: Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been raised. He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day as he usually did and stood up to read.

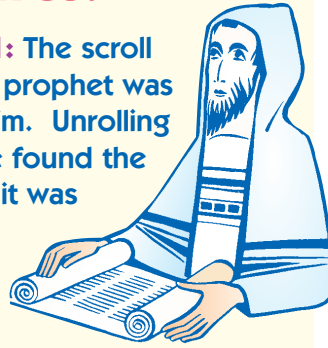
NARRATOR 1: The scroll of Isaiah the prophet was handed to him. Unrolling the scroll, he found the place where it was written—

JESUS: The Spirit of God is upon me, for God has anointed me and sent me to proclaim good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty for captives, sight to the blind, release to prisoners, to announce a year of favor from the Lord.

NARRATOR 2: Rolling up the scroll, Jesus gave it back to the assistant and sat down. Everyone in the synagogue fixed their eyes on him. He began to talk to them.

JESUS: Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

Luke 1.1-4; 4.14-21



encourages us to reflect again on our far-too-frequent temptation to devalue various people who don't seem to measure up quite well enough.

And who makes the list of people the prophet specifically singles out for compassion? Prisoners. Prisoners! They are on the to-do list that Jesus takes up at the outset of his own ministry, as recorded in Luke's gospel.

When the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed him, Jesus unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, therefore he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and release to prisoners."

The prisoners make the list along with the poor, the weak, and the disabled—the ones about whom it is the very easiest to say, "not worth it." They are the ones who seem to take more from society or from individuals than they give, the ones about whom we might ask, "What good have they ever done for us?"

As Jesus so vividly points out, we humans are in this thing together. In this amazing and wonderful and occasionally painful journey called life, none of us deserves to be a part of it any more than the most burdensome companion does. It isn't up to us to be alive and be here. Thank God for that. Nor is it up to us not to be here.

Jesus proclaims his prophetic mission.

The inside master key to the theology of Luke's gospel is the word *fulfilled* in verse one, chapter one. The third gospel writer explains he has collected what the eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have handed on about how Jesus *fulfills* the scriptures. In chapter four Luke supplies the key passage Jesus fulfills, a passage that opens the door to Jesus' mission. The key passage announces good news for the

poor but makes unbelievable claims in the ears of Jesus' home folks.

Jesus' words are not new to the people who are listening to him in the synagogue at Nazareth. They come right out of the book of the prophet Isaiah. What is new is Jesus' claim to fulfill the prophetic words.

In Jesus' mission the Church remembers the awesome value of human beings and

MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of Pax Christi Community is to respond to God's call with personal commitment and community action. Our mission is to be a visible witness of Christ, especially as recounted in the Sermon on the Mount. (Matt. Chap. 5, 6). Our mission is to reflect on our Judeo-Christian heritage, to discern the most pressing needs of society and to utilize our resources in order to meet them. Our mission is to build a community based on forgiveness of one another, caring for each other, bearing one another's burdens, personal prayer and sacramental worship.

- Who in the news needs help today?
- When has someone given you help that you could not pay back?

It is God who is the great keeper of the keys, who has given us other keys of all shapes and sizes to care for and who tells us, in effect, "If you can't figure out why this key or that one is on the ring, then hold tight to it until you do understand." Everyone one knows not to toss keys because their usefulness isn't immediately obvious.

Can we have the same regard for people? As Andy Rooney said, "I don't know what they're for and I don't dare throw them away. Obviously they open important places in my life. But where?"

- Talk about a time when a person surprised you by offering gifts to a community that you didn't know he or she had.

Perhaps some of those stray keys—some of those prisoners or poor or disabled or otherwise supposed undesirable folks—may open important places inside of us, like the towers of arrogance, the locked doors of self-deception, or the vaults of false pride. Perhaps those keys can open up and let fresh breezes blow into the darkened inner rooms in us from which come the voices that say, "You're a hand, not a foot, and the body doesn't need you."

This important gospel can instill in us a reverence for the most useless of the keys. One of them will indeed prove itself to be an inside master—the one that transforms us. That will happen as long as we welcome those who seem

so undesirable and have compassion for them. No key on the ring is expendable; we cast any of them aside at our own peril.

- Who has been a surprise inside master for you?
- When has a community welcomed you even though you didn't feel that you deserved to belong? What happened?
- What is a concrete way you have helped Jesus' mission progress in your neighborhood? In our world?



God's law is Israel's wealth.

Sunday's first reading tells the story of a people rediscovering and renewing their purpose. Like Jesus in the gospel the priest Ezra opens the scroll to interpret God's word to the assembled people. He reads from daybreak to midday.

It is interesting to hold up Sunday's gospel next to this first reading. In this passage Ezra is speaking to a whole city of people who might be tempted to think of themselves as poor or disadvantaged, as expendable keys, but Ezra says they are not poor at all.

These are people newly returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon. They have nothing but the word of God to sustain their hope—yet Ezra commands that they celebrate. "Rejoicing in the Lord must

DO SOMETHING



- Visit the Living Wage Calculator online: livingwage.mit.edu. The calculator supplies estimated costs of living in the USA by county. Visit your home county. Compare your expenses with the estimates. Consider who benefits from low-wage workers receiving a living wage.

be your strength,” he says. In recognizing the true source of their life, this band of people is rich indeed.

The book of the law that Ezra reads is a wealth meant to be shared with everyone. He reads to “men, women, and children old enough to understand” as the passage tells it. No one in this scene has a corner on the market of God’s graciousness.

Sometimes those who consider themselves to be privileged are the poorest among us. We are all Christ for one another, and if our baptisms into Christ mean anything, they mean that we are anointed, just as Jesus was, with the Spirit of God both to receive the good news in our poverty and to bring it to our brother and sisters in their poverty.

We are anointed for prophetic purpose. The apostle Paul challenges the Christians in Corinth and us “to honor the members we consider less honorable by giving them greater care.”

“The spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.” It is only when we are ready to realize that we are poor—only when we begin to care for the poor around us—that the richness of Christ’s love can fill us.

Ezra reads the law.

The priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, which consisted of men, women and those children old enough to understand. Standing at one end of the open place that

was before the Water Gate, he read out of the book from early morning until midday in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. All the people listened attentively to the book of the law.

The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose. Ezra opened the scroll so that all the people might see it (for he was standing higher than any of the people) and as he opened it, the people stood up.

Ezra blessed God and all the people, their hands raised high, answered, “Amen, amen.” Then they bowed down and prostrated themselves before God, their faces to the ground.

Ezra read plainly from the book of the law of God, interpreting it so that all could understand what was read. Then Nehemiah, the governor, and Ezra the priest-scribe, and the Levites who were teaching the people said, “Today is holy to our God. Do not be sad, and do not weep.”

All the people were weeping as they heard the words of the law. Ezra said to them, “Go eat rich foods and drink sweet drinks, and allot portions to those who had nothing prepared. For today is holy to our God. Do not be saddened this day, for rejoicing in God must be your strength.”

Nehemiah 8.2-4,5-6,8-10

- Who are the “poor” with whom you live each day?
- What is an example of someone you know who seems to be “rich” but who is in fact in desperate need?

PRAY

Create a litany of thanksgiving for prophets in our church and world. Name a prophetic person, say briefly how he or she challenges you, and ask God’s help in your own prophetic living.

Take turns naming a prophetic person.

LEADER: Just as all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also in Christ.

ALL: For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body.

LEADER: Whether Jew or Greek, slaves or free persons, we were all given to drink of one Spirit.

ALL: We are Christ’s body. Amen.

LEADER: Say amen to the statements that touch you.

- Spirit of God, anoint us to be good news to the poor and to all who need it.
- Open our eyes to human needs on our street and in our world.
- Grant freedom to those our personal or global indifference oppress.
- Open our hearts to prophets who disturb our easy lifestyles and probe our social consciences.



J. Michael Byron, a priest of the Archdiocese of St. Paul-Minneapolis and pastor of Pax Christi Community in Bloomington, Minnesota, died in 2022. He held a Ph.D. from Weston School of Theology in Cambridge, Massachusetts.