

SUNDAY

BY SUNDAY

by Patricia D. Nanoff

Open a bible and light a candle beside it. Share with one another an experience that has challenged your sense of security. Then pray the gathering prayer together.

LEADER: Hold on to the certain knowledge that our Redeemer lives and that through Christ we, too, shall live.

ALL: We believe in the promise of Christ's abiding love.

LEADER: May we find true liberation through Christ's continuing presence in our world.

ALL: We believe in the promise of Christ's abiding love. Amen.

I have sprinkled my grandmother's handiwork throughout my house. Quilts that Grandma pieced together decorate my bed. Rugs that she hooked protect my bare feet during the coldest months of the year.

When I examine the pieces of fabric that make up these simple household items, I touch my grandmother's values—her conviction that everything is useful. This is an uncommon belief in our current culture of disposable goods.

My grandmother entertained me for hours by describing

what the various squares of cloth represented. This piece was a dress for the first day of school; another piece was a suit for going to work. I can still picture her, seated at her treadle sewing machine like a small mountain, Mt. Grandma.

Her wonderful stories also held a bleaker reality. My mother was the youngest of four daughters; every garment she wore was remade from her older sisters' garments. A garment's usefulness did not end when Mom outgrew it. Grandma resurrected it as part of a quilt or rug.

My grandfather lost his job at the beginning of the great depression. My mother told stories about winters when the family had nothing to eat but the tomatoes Grandma had canned.

My grandmother always insisted that no matter how little we had, someone else had less. If I had two of anything, I should give one away to someone who had none. This was a tough sell to a young girl who yearned for what she could not have.

My grandmother's stories and lessons anchored my own bleak days as my mother's alcoholism became more pronounced and our family fell on hard times. She offered her lessons with liberal doses of good rich stories, as tart as the watermelon-rind pickles she put up for a taste of summer in February. She encoded her lessons in her ever-present piecework.

As an adult I found myself

working furiously to erase all evidence of these experiences. I wanted to construct a secure world, and I did this through the acquisition of the symbols of success. But I found these possessions never satisfied; they were simply good-luck charms purchased as a means to dim the past. Later on when my mother died, miraculously sober and healed, I inherited the quilts and the rugs and with these hand-me-downs came the memories.

The quilts and rugs trace the highs and lows, joys and



heartaches of my world. I came to realize that these bits of handiwork were symbols of a powerful inheritance, one that I had been avoiding as though it were bad news. I discovered that my real inheritance was the rich and true understanding that every thing, every person, and every experience is useful. Nothing is wasted.

● What gifts of spirit or values have you received as part of your family inheritance? From whom did you receive them?

● What gifts of spirit have you passed on to the next generation?

GOSPEL

God will bless the poor, hungry, sad, and persecuted.

NARRATOR: Jesus came down the mountain and stood on a level place where a crowd of his disciples and a large crowd of people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the coast of Tyre and Sidon were gathered. He looked at his disciples.

JESUS 1: Blessed are you poor because yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungering now, because you will be filled. Blessed are you who are weeping now, because you will laugh.

JESUS 2: Blessed are you when people hate you, exclude you, insult you, and throw out your name as evil because of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and

leap for joy, for your reward will be great in heaven. This is how people treated the prophets.

JESUS 3: But woe to you rich because your consolation is now. Woe to you who are full, you will hunger. Woe to you who laugh now, you will weep in your sorrow. Woe to you when all speak well of you. This is how people treated false prophets.

Luke 6.17,20-26



Jesus imagines remaking the world.

The gospel writer Luke confronts us repeatedly with questions of Jesus' identity. Who is this person who breaks all the rules and seeks out those whom others wish to avoid? What kind of world will people inherit if others follow his path and break the rules of tradition and culture? In Sunday's gospel we glimpse the world that Jesus envisions.

Luke has Jesus deliver his teaching about the beatitudes just after he names the twelve apostles. As he teaches, we see Jesus standing on level ground and addressing not only a crowd of disciples but people from Jerusalem and Judea in southern Israel and people from Tyre and Sidon north of Galilee. This scene tells us that Jesus is not gathering together an exclusive

assembly, open only to insiders. Jesus gathers in and includes everyone present.

Jesus' words are not gentle and subdued. Luke does not depict Jesus in pastel colors. His speech is a strident warning about the danger inherent in prosperity and abundance, a theme to which the gospel of Luke returns again and again.

In no uncertain terms Jesus declares that abundance is not blessedness, a shocking idea then and now. Jesus overturns the popular and comfortable idea that poor people somehow bring on their own circumstances and that rich people deserve their abundance.

Furthermore, Jesus regards those who hear this message

not as innocent bystanders but as responsible participants in remaking the world. We must include people who are poor, who are hungering, who are weeping in our lives or stand under the indictment of Jesus' prophetic woes.

● How does this gospel affect how you define blessedness?

● Who in our time do Jesus' beatitudes proclaim blessed?

● How are you blessed in any of these categories?

Sunday's gospel is unsettling for those of us living safe and snug lives. Jesus wants us to see that God does not will that people's life circumstances

defeat them. We must not lift up poverty as something ennobling, and therefore, good for those who suffer it.

Those who are poor, who are hungry, who weep must rely on God's mercy. They have no other recourse, no other place of comfort. There is nothing for them in this world. In proclaiming them blessed, Jesus affirms that God hears and includes them. They can rely on God's mercy.

In the world that Jesus is remaking, the poor are role models because they must turn to God for their comfort and relief as they suffer the real-life experience of hunger, poverty, fear, and powerlessness. Their suffering is not abstract.

We cannot hold the person who suffers at a comfortable arm's length. Hunger hurts; poverty hurts. Jesus says, "Blessed are you who are hungry NOW..." Jesus' words give poverty, hunger, and sorrow an immediacy meant to grab our attention.

In the world that Jesus is remaking, the rich are filled with woe because they turn to possessions and power for their comfort. But these comforts are fleeting.

- How do you respond to the challenge in Jesus' blessings and woes?
- What woes do you experience in abundance?

Jesus reminds us what heeding his words and including the poor in our lives will cost. When we turn away from the status quo, there is a penalty. Jesus says, "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you." These harsh verbs describe what can happen to those who try to live into and help build the world that Jesus is remaking.

The world that Jesus envisions redefines poverty and abundance. He invites us to leave the world of abundance and invites us to enter the world of justice, to care for and lift up those who are poor, hungry, and weeping now. Our true inheritance from Jesus is a world in which we gather every person in, where we honor all, and waste no one or nothing.

Currently we are celebrating the longest season of the Church year—Sundays of Ordinary Time. In the beatitudes Jesus envisions everyday life transformed. He challenges us to remake our world, to live out the promise of his love through re-thinking how we understand security, comfort, charity, and justice. He challenges us to leave the world of complacency.



Such a life requires great hope in the promise of God's strength and abiding love. Such a life requires openness to God's grace, reshaping our priorities.

Such a life requires a belief that in Christ the world will be made new and in this new world, no person will lack adequate food, shelter, and comfort. Such a life requires the belief that in this new world, every thing, every person, and every experience will be useful. Nothing and no one will be wasted.

- How do you speak about those who have less than you have?
- When have people with less felt a burden to you? When have people who are poor, hungry, or weeping blessed you?
- What concrete actions can you do this week to share what you have with those who have less?

DO SOMETHING

CHARITY **JUSTICE**

- What local and global organizations work to remake the world, following Jesus' beatitude vision? How can you participate in their work? For example, visit PovertyUSA at www.povertyusa.org.
- Invite an elderly neighbor to dinner.

What sustains our lives?

The prophet Jeremiah uses rich imagery to describe the opposite poles of our experience of love, trust, and security. When we choose to trust only in ourselves and in what we can make happen, we find ourselves living in a dry parched world where security is elusive and where we must construct safety and prosperity at the expense of others.

This is a stingy, fearful world, a wasteland where relationships wither and hopes die. The energy it takes to maintain and protect this world leads to bitterness and cynicism about those who have less.

However, Jeremiah offers a compelling, companion image. When we trust God, we open our lives to God's gifts in those who survive at the margins of our lives and world. This trust is like planting a tree near water. Trust opens us to blessed relationships and security that surpasses the security of the world.



Jeremiah describes a world of beauty, of perpetual springtime, new growth, and fruitfulness. When we trust in God, says the prophet, our world is always green and we can expect the beauty of a life in full flower in which relationships flourish and nurture our souls.

Who is blessed?

Cursed are those who trust in human beings, who make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from God. These shall be like a shrub in the desert that enjoys no change of season, but stands in a lava waste, a salty and empty earth.

Blessed are those who trust in God, whose hope is God. They shall be like a tree planted beside the waters that stretches out its roots to the stream: It shall not fear when the heat comes; its leaves stay green; in the year of drought it shows no distress, but still bears fruit.

Jeremiah 17.5-8

- In what ways is your life like a tree planted by the waters and rooted in the life of God?
- How have you sustained the arid periods of your spiritual journey?

PRAY

Conclude your reflection on Sunday's scriptures by considering a way to live the beatitudes more fully.

LEADER: Jesus has given us a vision of a world in full flower, a world in which by God's grace we nourish one another's spirits and gather people in need among our own.

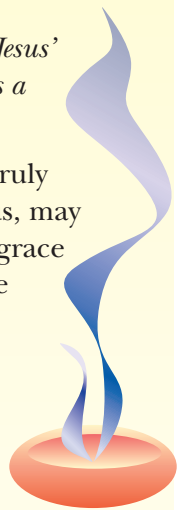
ALL: We believe in the promise of Christ's abiding love.

Name ways to act on Jesus' vision personally or as a group.

LEADER: May God truly bless us and keep us, may we experience the grace of God, lighting the path of authentic prosperity.

ALL: Amen.

Offer each other a blessing of peace.



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Grow Your Group This Lent

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