

By Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Open a bible and light a candle beside it at the center of your group. Pray together.

LEADER: Lord, make me an instrument of your peace, where there is hatred let me sow love.

ALL: Where there is injury, pardon. Where there is doubt, faith.

LEADER: Where there is despair, hope. Where there is darkness, light.

ALL: Where there is sadness, joy.

LEADER: Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console,

ALL: to be understood as to understand,

LEADER: to be loved as to love.

ALL: It is in giving that we receive,

LEADER: It is in pardoning that we are pardoned.

ALL: And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

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SUNDAY by SUNDAY

Our daily news often immerses us in divisions that can slice through families, friendships, and neighborhood bonds. We live in polarizing times. Folks hint their political leanings in whispers to new acquaintances, testing whether to say more or less.

Young people disclose their pronouns on their name badges at meetings in support of non-binary and transsexual friends. I cringe at how frequently out of enthusiastic friendliness young people address me and rooms full of women as “you guys.” Does using inclusive language belong only to my generation? So easily we differ and in what agony we struggle to understand.

To reckon means to count, calculate, consider the cost, to settle accounts. Reckoning is a key word that civil rights lawyer and advocate Michelle Alexander

explores in a *New York Times* column, “Reckoning with Violence”. The USA has 2.2 million persons in prison, the New Jim Crow Alexander names it in her book by that title about mass incarceration.

Her column calls for survivors of crime and perpetrators to meet and work out repair for the wrong, face to face. Ninety percent of the perpetrators of nonviolent crime choose to have survivors shape the repair.

In her book *Until We Reckon*, Danielle Sered finds imprisonment counterproductive. Reckoning is a pathway to accountability. In restorative justice circles, a perpetrator not only answers to a survivor but can put a life together and stay out of prison. She urges us as a nation to break our addiction to caging human beings.

In Sunday’s gospel Jesus is reckoning the cost of discipleship to himself and to those who believe in him. He asks, “Do you think I have come to bring peace to the Earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.”

● How do you work to reconcile divisions in our communities of faith today?



Sunday Readings: Jeremiah 38.4-6,8-10; Hebrews 12.1-4; Luke 12.49-53



GOSPEL



Jesus brings a fire to earth that divides us.

JESUS 1: I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!

JESUS 2: From now on five in one household will be divided,

three against two and two against three; they will be divided father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.

Luke 12.49-53

What is the fire Jesus brings to earth?

To read the New Testament is to read stories about people of faith praying and struggling together about important and sometimes divisive questions. In the first two sentences in Sunday's gospel Jesus speaks with urgency first about fire, then about baptism. He wishes the fire he brings to earth were already kindled and his own baptism completed. His words anticipate early Church debates.

When Luke writes in the mid 80s of the first century, Jesus has completed his baptism—his suffering, death, resurrection, and return to God, but he has not come again in glory. Meanwhile Christian faith has spread not only among Jews but among Gentiles and created conflicts. Baptism is one such conflict.

Among Gentiles baptism takes the place of circumcision,

the sign for men of Jewish faith. But some of the Pharisees who have become Christians object. They think Gentiles should be circumcised and instructed in keeping the law of Moses.

The first Church council convenes in Jerusalem in AD 49 to discuss and pray about whether Gentiles entering the Christian movement need to be circumcised. Luke tells the whole story in Acts 15.

Both Peter and Paul agree that circumcision is not necessary. The council decides to welcome believers via the ritual of baptism and understands that faith in Jesus circumcises the hearts of believers.

The fire Jesus wishes were already kindled points to this challenge of Jews and Gentiles in Christ working together to reconcile divisions. Fire is a symbol of the Holy Spirit.

Early in Luke's gospel John the Baptist connects fire, Spirit, and baptism when he anticipates one more powerful than he who "will baptize not with water but with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Luke 3.16). On Pentecost the Spirit kindles the fire Jesus brings to earth by setting the tongues of his disciples afire with the good news of his resurrection (Acts 2).

● What today divides the Church as deeply as the question of circumcision divided Jewish and Gentile Christians?

● When have you experienced dissension and division dissipate?

Jesus' teachings on non-retaliation also cause division among the earliest Christians. Jesus teaches his disciples to love their enemies and do good to those who hate them (Luke 6.27). However, the disciples seem not to take Jesus' words to heart; in fact, James and John ask Jesus whether they should call on God to destroy the Samaritans, who refuse to receive them in their village (10.29-37).

Women's leadership becomes a problem as the Christian mission grows and Jesus does not return. The earliest Christians gathered in houses, and women led many of these households. For example, Paul greets Aquila and Prisca and the church at their house (1 Corinthians 16.19). Paul commends



Some Christian sarcophagi at the Vatican Museum show women with arms extended in prayer.

Phoebe, deacon of the Church at Cenchreae (Romans 16.1).

In Acts 9.36-42, Peter restores a disciple named Tabitha to life. A whole household of widows surrounds her in this account. Paul greets Junia and Andronicus, a woman and man who are apostles in Romans 16.7.

Some leaders, such as the person scholars refer to as “the Pastor” in 1 Timothy 2.11-12, think women should not have leadership positions in the churches.

The gospel anticipates dividing fires will persist. Every election season lights fires and puts Catholic social teaching to work. Who includes the least in their vision of economic life? Who values the family and puts people to work? Who listens and learns as well as speaks and stands up for their constituents? Who can negotiate for the common good?

● What value do you experience in talking about difficult, even divisive, questions?

Selling new products and sales usually means comparing old and new. Sharpening differences creates a threshold for making a choice and a sale. Either-or thinking works great for sales.

As young people, we typically use either-or thinking in developing a self and an identity. In this process many young people distance themselves from institutional religion and identify as “nones,” nonaffiliated. Certainly, the sex abuse scandals have put off many young Catholics, who also accept and make room in their lives for LGBTQ and transgender people.

Both-and thinking and practice works better in building community, welcoming all, honoring cultural differences. Both-and acknowledges the limits of each person’s experience and works intentionally to know many other people unlike one’s self. Both-and thinking requires a secure self to risk going beyond the familiar.



● When have you learned from someone unlike yourself in race, social class, culture, education?



Where do we hear God’s voice?

Sunday’s first reading takes place in the last days before the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E. (before the common era). The Babylonian army has laid siege to the city to starve out its defenders. The prophet Jeremiah urges the king to surrender to the Babylonian general Nebuchadnezzar, save the inhabitants of the city from starvation, and save the city itself from destruction. The situation is desperate, the characters dreadfully familiar to us.

Central in the story is the vacillating politician, King Zedekiah of Jerusalem, who relinquishes his power to his advisors and blows with the winds of popular sentiment.

At the king’s side are the government officials who stoke the fires of war, heedless of

the plight of the city’s starving residents. With them are the experts, rival prophets who have bought their place in a corrupt regime with fantasies of economic success and military triumph.

Finally, there is one lone truth-teller,

the great prophet Jeremiah, unceremoniously shuffled from his jail cell to solitary confinement at the bottom of a muddy cistern.

The passage rings with irony. The officials' obsequious concern for public morale contrasts with Jeremiah's urgent concern to save as many as possible from horrible death and degradation.

The king's acknowledgment that Jeremiah tells the truth fails to deliver the prophet from the advisers who throw him in the cistern. Only a foreigner, a lowly civil servant in the king's court, responds to the prophet's words with real concern for the hungry of Jerusalem. It is worth noting this man is an Ethiopian.

Jeremiah in the cistern

The officials of Jerusalem said to the king, "This man ought to be put to death, because he is discouraging the soldiers who are left in this city, and all the people, by speaking such words to them. For this man is not seeking the welfare of this people, but their harm."

King Zedekiah said, "Here he is; he is in your hands; for the king is powerless against you." So they took Jeremiah and threw him into the cistern of Malchiah, the king's son, which was in the court of the guard. They let Jeremiah down by ropes. Now there was no water in the cistern, but only mud, and Jeremiah sank in the mud.

But Ebedmelech the Ethiopian, a eunuch in the king's house, left



the king's house and spoke to the king. "My lord king, these men have acted wickedly in all they did to the prophet Jeremiah by throwing him into the cistern to die there of hunger, for there is no bread left in the city."

Then the king commanded Ebedmelech the Ethiopian, "Take three men with you from here, and pull the prophet Jeremiah up from the cistern before he dies."

Jeremiah 38.4-6, 8-10

- Where do we hear the voice of the prophets today? Who tells us the truth about how to re-weave civic community?
- What other voices compete for our attention?

PRAY

LEADER: Help us, loving God, throw off all that holds us back from following Jesus. Give us who follow him boldness to persevere in pursuing the reign of justice.

Each person who wishes voices his or her own petitions. Respond to each petition with the following prayer.

ALL: Help us stand firm in our truth.

Conclude together.

ALL: Give us grace, O just and compassionate God, to discern and honor the voices of conscience around us and among us. Amen.



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DO SOMETHING

- Learn about restorative justice as a model not only for bringing victims and offenders together but for reconciling differences on other issues. Visit the International Institute for Restorative Practices at www.iirp.edu.

Go to GoodGroundPress.com for daily prayers.