

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Place an open bible, lighted candle, and glass of water at the center of your group. Put some of your loose change on the table beside the bible. Pray together.

LEADER: (*Uses a small cedar branch to sprinkle water on your group.*) May this water remind you of your commitment to find ways to bridge the abyss between rich and poor among us.

ALL: Amen.

LEADER: Loving God, we gather to hear your Word to us.

ALL: And to find room in our hearts for it to take root and grow.

LEADER: We ask for the grace to see the world as Jesus did.

ALL: And to find room in our hearts for people in need.

LEADER: May our reflection help us commit to compassionate service of others.

ALL: In Jesus' name. Amen.

In the parable from Luke's gospel this Sunday, a rich man has no clue a poor man is starving at his gate. They live in separate worlds. Luke frequently emphasizes Jesus' concern for the poor. Toni Schewe has a creative way of including the poor in her life.

In mid December Toni emails her January calendar to friends,

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY



so they can sign up to enjoy her birthday month with her. Friends can sign up for a bowling night, a one-on-one coffee shop stop, an evening of volleyball, a volunteer service night. She connects with college and high school friends, rugby teammates, fellow artists, work colleagues.

Two of my nieces signed up for the service night, which turned out to be making dinner for 45 men who find food and a bed each evening at St. Stephen's Shelter. At this shelter men who have some kind of job can ask the shelter to save money for them

toward rent and a damage deposit for a place of their own.

The shelter encourages wholesome meals. My nieces made hot dishes with hamburger, spinach, peppers, tomatoes, and pasta. Toni made potatoes. A friend presented carrots in a tasty citrus base. A rugby forward and a high school friend laid out the food on a table in the hallway.

The men noticed how much fun these women were having together and wanted to know why they came. One confessed it was part of Toni's birthday celebration. Before long eight of the men on the way back for seconds and thirds serenaded her with "Happy Birthday."

● In what creative ways do you include people who are poor in your life?



Sunday Readings: Amos 6.1,4-7,
1 Timothy 6.11-16, Luke 16.19-31

GOSPEL

A beggar is blessed, a rich man tormented.



NARRATOR: One day Jesus told his friends a story about a beggar and a rich man.

JESUS 1: Once there was a rich man who dressed in royal purple and fine linen. He ate splendidly every day. At the rich man's gate lay a beggar, a man named Lazarus, who was covered with sores. Lazarus wished he had even the scraps from the rich man's table to eat. But he didn't. Dogs came and licked his sores.

JESUS 2: Eventually Lazarus died, and angels carried him to the arms of Abraham. Then the rich man died, too, and was buried. He wound up in the abode of the dead in torment. When he looked up, he saw Abraham far off with Lazarus resting in his arms.

RICH MAN: Abraham, have pity on me. Send Lazarus to put a drop of water on my tongue, for I am tortured in these flames.

ABRAHAM: Remember how well you lived when you were alive and how miserable Lazarus was. Now he has found comfort, but you have found torment. He cannot help you. Between you and us is a great abyss that no one can cross.

RICH MAN: If you can't help me, at least send Lazarus to my father's house and warn my five brothers, so they don't wind up in this place of torment.

ABRAHAM: Your brothers can pay attention to the word of Moses and the prophets.

RICH MAN: They need more. If someone went to them from the dead, they would change their ways.

ABRAHAM: If your brothers do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone would rise from the dead.

Luke 16.19-31

Disturbingly, Lazarus lies at the rich man's gate. He is not at the city gates or the temple doors. He is near. In fact, Lazarus is so near that the story tells us he sees scraps fall from the rich man's table and longs to eat them. He is the nearest poor man, the one the rich man might have noticed and helped.

The many poor people panhandling in our cities put Sunday's gospel squarely on our doorsteps. Like the rich man, most of us have poor people at our gates—our subway stops, our ATMs, the doorways of our churches. Some have burned out every relationship in their lives for booze or drugs. Others don't have a stable enough lifestyle to stay on their medications.

In small towns people often know people in need and do what they can for them, though not always. But in cities poor people become anonymous. Their presence and number can seem menacing to our own well-being.

What is the ideal relationship between rich and poor?

Beginning two Sundays back with Jesus' parables of the prodigal son and then the unjust manager, the Church hears gospel stories that only Luke tells. Luke presses distinctive themes—investing in the poor, the importance of prayer, forgiving sins and debts. In this Sunday's gospel Luke tells Jesus' story of how God will reverse the fortunes of rich and poor.

The gospel gives spare but significant details about the rich

man's lifestyle. He is not a king or prince but dresses in the royal color and wears fine linen. A feast is his regular, everyday fare. The story gives the man no name, rather his wealth and comfort define him.

Lazarus, on the other hand, has a name but no money or food. He is sick with sores that afflict him. Only a dog, an animal unclean according to Jewish law, reaches out to him and licks his sores.

- Who begs at your gate?
- What assumptions do you make about people who are poor? How do you compare them with yourself?
- What value do you find in distancing yourself from people in need? What value have you found in connecting with them?
- What do Jesus and Luke consider the ideal relationship between Christians and the poor at our door?

The great abyss that yawns between Lazarus and the rich man in the abode of the dead exists already in the distance between them when they are alive. The rich man never notices Lazarus begging or responds to him. He doesn't know the other man exists. The rich man has no idea that his riches are anything but well-deserved blessings from God. He has no other ethic than spending his money on himself. He builds no connection between himself and the poor man at his gate.

The two characters in Jesus' story represent extremes. The poor man is sick, hungry, and poor—about as down and out as he can be. The well-clothed, well-fed rich man is as oblivious as he can be. The story invites us to place ourselves on the continuum between the two.

The fortunes of the two characters in Jesus' story reverse. The poor beggar who had no friend but a dog rests in the bosom of Abraham, a metaphor for belonging to God. But thirst and heat torment the man who had so many creature comforts while he lived. At this point in the story when he is in need, the rich man refers to Lazarus by name, suggesting that he had seen the beggar, knew his name, and refused to help.

Jesus' story criticizes the rich man's view of life. He deserves torment, while Lazarus belongs with God and Abraham and deserves blessing. The rich man's distance from Lazarus becomes an impassable abyss.

Parker Palmer, who works to restore public spaces such as gates, streets, subway and bus stops as places of conversations



Adele O'Sullivan, CSJ, MD, was a doctor to the homeless in Phoenix. She founded Circle the City, a nonprofit that provides respite care and hospice for homeless people. "With this service," Sister Adele says, "it is no longer the standard that homeless sick people recover on the streets."

and civility, studies people's growing fear of one another. He notes that people who go regularly into city centers for their work tend to be much less afraid of violent crime against them than those who have moved to suburbs to get away from such violence and no longer have any regular, real experience of center- or inner-city life.

Many people rely on the media as their source of information about life in the city. They have no real experience to counter the violence the media repeatedly report, so they become increasingly fearful and reclusive. They put security systems in their homes and cars to protect themselves from the encroachment of violence. An abyss yawns between the people of city and suburb, city and country.

● **What relationships that go beyond giving a check might your community of faith nurture between rich and poor?**

● **What roles might your parish play in helping rich and poor, city and suburban people meet, mix, and connect?**

Sunday's gospel takes a double-edged turn when the rich man asks to warn his brothers about his punishment. With one edge of judgment, Abraham insists the rich man's brothers can learn from Moses and the prophets to do justice to the poor. For example, Psalm 1 praises the just person, who meditates on the law day and night, studying it in order to seek all it requires. The prophets make justice for the poor, especially widows and orphans, the measure of fidelity to God.

With a second edge of judgment, Abraham insists that a person who will not learn justice from the law will never believe a witness from the dead. His statement indicts people who claim the law is from God without keeping it. Luke implies those who do the work of God will recognize that Jesus' work and witness are from God, too.

● **What public policies clearly support or clearly burden people who are poor?**



Amos warns the indifferent rich.

Amos is one of Israel's prophets who warns the complacent rich about their obligation on God's behalf to the poor. His warning mocks the lifestyle of the rich and famous of his day. They lie on ivory beds, eating and drinking well, listening to music, and paying no attention to the people of the ten northern tribes whose kingdom the Assyrians conquered in 721 B.C. *Joseph* in the reading refers to the northern kingdom.

Their neighbors have had their homes destroyed, and their orchards and olive groves hacked down. This destruction does not touch the people Amos addresses.

Amos speaks woes.

Woe to the complacent in Zion!
Lying on beds of ivory, stretched
comfortably on their couches,
They eat lambs from the flock,
and calves from the stall!

Improvising to the music
of the harp, like David,
they devise their own
accompaniment.
They drink wine from bowls and
anoint themselves
with the best oils;
yet they are not made ill
by the collapse of Joseph!

Therefore, now they shall be
the first to go into exile,
and their wanton revelry
shall be done away with.

Amos 6.1,4-7

- About what are you too complacent?
- Who is collapsing in our world to whom we should be attending?

Joan Mitchell, CSJ, editor of Sunday by Sunday, holds a Masters in Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School and a Ph.D. in New Testament from Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN.

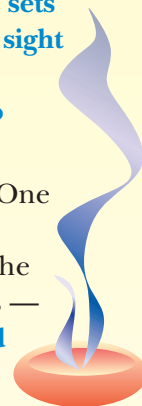
PRAY

Make a personal commitment to do a work of justice for the poor this week. Decide together on a purpose for your loose change. Share commitments publicly with your group; then pray Psalm 145.

LEADER: Happy those who keep faith, secure justice for the oppressed, and give food to the hungry.

ALL: The Holy One sets captives free, gives sight to the blind, and raises up those who are bowed down

LEADER: The Holy One protects strangers; the fatherless and the widow God sustains —
ALL: But the wicked God thwarts.



**Holy Women of
Luke's Gospel**

Praying Their Stories
Joan Mitchell, CSJ, and Angela Holmberg, OSU

MEET THE WOMEN OF LUKE'S GOSPEL

Luke is known for his stories about women. Meet them in word, art, and prayer in *Holy Women of Luke's Gospel*. Ideal for small-group sharing or individual prayer. Read sample chapters at goodgroundpress.com.

1-9 copies, \$8.00 each; 10-99, \$7.00;
100 or more, \$5.50.

DO SOMETHING



- October and November are traditional times to consider whether everyone in our city, country, and world has enough to eat. Find out what food initiatives your parish supports and join these efforts.

- Heifer International aims to bring an end to world hunger, one family at a time. Your whole family can be involved in sending animals to poor families all over the world to be a source of income and food. Go to heifer.org to view their materials. Maybe you can buy a llama for Christmas this year!