

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Place an open bible at the center of your group with a bowl of grapes beside it to share.

LEADER: As we share the fruit the vineyard produces, let us commit ourselves to cultivate God's world faithfully.

ALL: Let us act in justice and mercy.

LEADER: May we embody the one Spirit of Christ.

ALL: Let us act in justice and mercy.

LEADER: May we not act out of rivalry or conceit but look to others' interests as our own.

ALL: Let us act in justice and mercy.

LEADER: May the work of our love grow complete in Christ.

ALL: Remember your mercies to us, loving God.

Aparent concerned about how a school handles slavery and racism in its curriculum can call the principal or go to the office to register complaints or support. Citizens with sinkholes or potholes in the pavements can go to the mayor. The school office and city council room regularly become places of dispute and change.

Citizens regularly take their concerns and protests to state capitols and the U.S. capital in



Washington, D.C. Our state has a Joint Religious Legislative Coalition that is an inclusive, interfaith, public interest lobbying group that sponsors a Day on the Hill. The day brings people of faith to talk with their representatives about caring for the poorest among us and other social justice issues.

Class trips take young people to Washington, D.C. to see the Capitol and visit the museums and historical sites the Mall enshrines. Most recently I visited the Museum of African American History and Culture and the Museum of the American Indian. The intricate beaded flowers on an Anishinaabe deerskin vest grow where I come from.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. stands tall in a memorial across the small pond from the Thomas Jefferson memorial. Crowds filled the Mall the day he delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech in the

struggle for civil and economic rights for African Americans.

In Israel in Jesus' time the seat of power is Jerusalem, the temple, its religious heart. Like the Mall in Washington, D.C., the courtyards that surround the temple create large public spaces where people meet and interact.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus sets off for Jerusalem after Peter answers the question, "Who do you say that I am?" When Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, an enthusiastic welcoming crowd stirs up turmoil in the city about who he is.

In Sunday's gospel and the gospels of the next four Sundays, Jesus teaches in the courts of power. His sparring partners are the religious leaders of his time—the priests who serve the temple, scribes, Sadducees, elders, and Pharisees.

● What is your experience of bringing issues to seats of power?



GOSPEL

Jesus confronts religious leaders.

NARRATOR: When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching.

PRIESTS, ELDERS: By what authority are you doing these things?

NARRATOR: Jesus did not answer directly.

JESUS: What do you think of this case? A man had two children. He came to the first.

MAN: Son, go out and work in the vineyard today.

FIRST CHILD: No, I will not.

JESUS: But afterwards the son regretted it and went. Then the man came to the second child and said the same thing. The second answered—

SECOND CHILD: Yes, sir.

JESUS: But did not go. Which of the two did the father's will?

PRIESTS, ELDERS: The first.

JESUS: I assure you that tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you. When John came preaching a way of righteousness you put no faith in him; but the tax collectors and prostitutes did believe in him. Yet even when you saw that, you did not repent and believe in him.

Matthew 21:28-32



Only the western wall of the temple in Jerusalem remains, a holy place of prayer for Jews.



What is Jesus calling us to do in God's vineyard?

Sunday's gospel comes from Matthew 21, which begins with Jesus entering Jerusalem, the scene churches today celebrate on Palm Sunday. As his first action in the city, Jesus goes to the temple, drives out the sellers, and overturns the tables of the moneychangers. He reclaims the temple as a place of prayer. His actions antagonize the priests who serve there.

Only Matthew's gospel tells us that after Jesus cleanses the temple, the blind and lame come to him there, and he heals them. Those he heals proclaim, "Hosanna to the Son of David," hailing Jesus as messiah the same way the people who welcome him to the city do.

Needless to say the welcome, the upheaval at the temple, the

healings, and the acclaim anger the chief priests, scribes, and elders who witness these things. No wonder they question by whose authority Jesus is teaching in the temple as Sunday's gospel begins.

In this volatile situation, Jesus tells a parable rather than confront the officials directly. A parable works like a mirror. In deciding what its characters should do, hearers are making judgments that reflect their values.

Jesus uses the parable of the two sons to ask temple officials which son does the father's will. The chief priests and elders agree that the first son does, the one who refuses, but regrets his refusal, and goes to work. The second son appears obedient but doesn't follow

through. The leaders rightly value the son who actually does the work in the vineyard, the son who changes.

Jesus wants the temple leaders to change and do God's work among the people. In this scene he challenges them to tend to the blind and lame people who fill the temple courts he has cleansed of commerce and readied for prayer and healing.

● What speaks to you in the parable?

● What does the parable make you want to change?

Jesus' parable draws on parents' experience of how differently their children act and obey. However, Jesus



The Standing Rock Lakota failed to stop the Dakota Access pipeline but brought their protest to Washington to draw attention to how frequently pipelines use reservation land.

puts forward the case of the two children not in a family setting but in the public space at the center of Israel's religious practice and the home turf of the chief priests. He is on the capitol steps.

The temple is where the people pray, offer their gifts and sacrifices, and pay the temple taxes that support its priests. The vineyard in Jesus' parable is God's vineyard, the people of Israel its vines, the temple its prime site.

By using a parable, Jesus intentionally deflects the challenge of the priests and elders to the authority he has claimed in teaching in the temple and chasing out buyers and sellers. Jesus wants them to see themselves as the son who regrets saying no and goes to work. He calls them to practice the covenant law they preach and represent.

● From what challenges have you hesitated and held back, then taken up responsibility?

● What challenges have you taken on but then dropped?

After the priests and elders have identified with the first son who goes to work, Jesus holds up John the Baptist as a standard. The Baptist preached a way of righteousness.

In our time righteousness sometimes connotes people who uphold the law without compassion or without keeping it themselves. In the scriptures the word expresses the ideals of uprightness, justice, and equity. Righteousness is what God requires.

The righteous person fulfills God's commands, God's will. The righteous person obeys the father's command to work in the vineyard. Saying and doing are the same.

The priests and elders who

have the most wealth and social position in ancient Israel can learn from those at the low end of society who heard and responded to the Baptist's message. For example, tax collectors lived outside the religious law because they dealt with the Romans in their work. People commonly thought they overcharged to line their own pockets.

Woman who relied on prostitution to survive were poor. They had been left without a household through a husband's death or a divorce. Their livelihood put them outside the religious law.

Ironically these lawbreakers responded to the Baptist and to Jesus. They repented and are entering the kingdom of God before the lawkeepers who they think have nothing to learn and who neglect the poor.

Jesus' own actions in the temple show he is God's faithful son. He heals those who are sick and diseased, loves the lost, and teaches by forgiving. He purifies the temple and religious law and practice.

● Who is leading the Christian community into a future fruitful for members and the world?

● What pressing needs do you see in God's vineyard today?

● What work challenges you to take it on?

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DO SOMETHING

● Each week *Sunday by Sunday* suggests social actions that groups can do. Charity is one foot of social action. Charity is about responding to people's immediate needs—serving a meal at a shelter, stocking a food pantry. Justice is the second foot. Justice work often involves partnering with organizations that research and advocate for systemic change in areas of public policy, especially policies that offer a hand up for people who are poor.

Sunday's parable has a message not only for the chief priest and elders whom Jesus addresses in the gospel but for the Christian community for whom Matthew writes—and for us. In his ministry Jesus extends God's invitation to work in the vineyard. He calls and commands disciples to go out and preach the gospel not in words only but in

and through living as a new people of God, a community, the Church.

My sister remembers me as the second son, a shirker. I had found *War and Peace* among new arrivals at our library and couldn't put it down. I remember sitting on the white vacuum cleaner box in the kitchen, book in one hand and dish towel in the other, shirking.

Family duties and work lay many responsibilities on all of us. Job descriptions lay out the responsibilities that a business person counts on an employee to do. Many family and office conflicts arise out of people shirking duties others depend on them to do. Our Christian duty in the old and new law is love that gives life, forgives, includes.

Jesus invites disciples in every time and place to work in God's world for compassionate relations among all people and with the earth. Free the oppressed. Share your bread with the hungry. If a neighbor asks for your coat, give your shirt as well. Do not put off until tomorrow any good you can do today. Promises in words and good intentions are not enough. Doing the work of God demands action.

● What gospel duty do you carry out most? Avoid most?



Virtue bears life and fruit in deeds.

Like the gospel, Sunday's first reading from the prophet Ezekiel emphasizes that life with God calls us to virtue lived out in action. Ezekiel is among the first people of Israel the Babylonians take captive in 597 B.C., 10 years

before Jerusalem finally falls to siege. He begins to speak as a prophet in Babylon in 593.

Speaking for God to those exiled with him, Ezekiel insists God is not unfair. The people in exile can turn to God and find mercy. Every generation is responsible for its own deeds. In God's eyes what counts is how each person keeps the commandments. Turn to God and live is the prophet's message.

Today Christians around the world receive the Synod vision calling the baptized to participate fully in the life of the Church in their parishes and dioceses. The *Final Document* describes circle processes like Conversation in the Spirit that gives voice to all the baptized and challenge us to listen to one another and discern our paths together.

Turn and live.

Yet you say, "The way of the Lord is unfair." Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair? When the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity, they shall die for it; for the iniquity that they have committed they shall die.

Again, when the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life. Because they considered and turned away from all the transgressions that they had committed, they shall surely live; they shall not die.

Ezekiel 18.25-28

● Whom do you need to show mercy and welcome back into a relationship?

● When has someone's mercy been life-giving to you?

PRAY

Pray together Sunday's second reading, an early Christian hymn from Philippians 2.6-11.

LEADER: May we have the same attitude that is in Christ Jesus.

ALL: Though in the form of God, he emptied himself, coming in human likeness.

LEADER: May we participate in the Spirit and live Jesus' compassion.

ALL: Jesus humbled himself even to death on a cross.

LEADER: May we unite our minds and hearts.

ALL: And every voice confess Jesus Christ is Lord. Amen.



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 in St. Paul, MN.

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