



THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

CYCLE A

Malachi 1:14-2:2, 8-10
1 Thessalonians 2:7-9, 13
Matthew 23:1-12

GATHERING

(A lighted candle, an unfinished paper chain with the names of group members on the links, enough extra unmarked links to allow one for each member, and a bottle of glue or roll of tape rest on a table in the gathering place.)

Last week we were asked to reflect on injustice in our community and in the world. This week's scriptures suggest that mutual respect, friendly persuasion and shared effort can do much to draw us closer to one another and to God. *(As the session begins, members take a few moments to share briefly how their reflection on injustice during the past week may have affected their prayer life or prompted them to some action.)*

OPENING PRAYER

Leader: Pope John Paul II, in his prayer to God, our Father, urges us to seek a greater loving relationship with God and neighbor. Let us take a few moments to sense God's presence among us. *(Pause.)* Let us pray now to overcome some of the barriers that may distance us from God and neighbor.

Member: God, our Father,
As we combat the urge to put down others,

All: May our love for you and our neighbor grow stronger.

Member: As we search within for the prejudice that confines us,

All: May our love for you and our neighbor grow stronger.

Member: As we struggle to lead through example not power,

All: May our love for you and our neighbor grow stronger.

Member: As we try to dispel the fear that makes us wary of others,

All: May our love for you and our neighbor grow stronger.

Member: As we grapple with desires to prove ourselves right,

All: May our love for you and our neighbor grow stronger.

Member: As we work to break down walls that shut out others,

All: May our love for you and our neighbor grow stronger.

All: God, our Father, we have much to learn. Help us to recognize our sources of learning. Keep us alert to the example of Christ, your Son, the example we find in scripture and Church teaching. Help us to see others as sources of your reflected goodness and love. Help us make the Holy Jubilee Year a time of openness, dialogue and encounter with all people. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Focus Question

When have the words or actions of another helped you find God?

SCRIPTURE SHARING AND REFLECTION

(The scriptures are read aloud with a pause between readings.)

Commentary

This week's scriptures lead us to examine various religious leadership styles. Through their bad example, the Levitical priests of Malachi's time cause people to falter in their faith. The scribes and Pharisees of Christ's time say one thing, but do another. They exalt themselves and assume a holier-than-thou position. They seek status. They control others through domination, retribution, prejudice and ostracism. Contrast those styles with the leadership styles of Jesus and Paul.

Jesus urges his listeners to turn to God, our Father, in heaven. He urges them to see themselves as needy and poor in spirit, as learners. Jesus preaches humility as a means of showing others the love and message of God.

Paul provides a living example of what Jesus is telling his listeners. Paul's leadership style among the Thessalonians was one that used mutual respect, friendly persuasion and side-by-side effort. In his self-denying style, Paul led his flock through encouragement, forgiveness, acceptance, and inclusion.

Paul's leadership was gentle, exemplary. He shared the word in a heart-to-heart style. His method nourished a sense of God's presence in his listeners. His lifestyle and work ethic formed a bonding substance with the people. Paul's love for the Thessalonians linked himself, his listeners and God. Paul saw himself as a Christ-bearer who could say to the people, "That is why we thank God constantly that in receiving his message from us you took it, not as the word of men, but as it truly is, the word of God at work within you who believe."

We, too, are believers in Paul's message. We, too, are in some respects religious leaders. Through our baptism, each of us is a Christ-bearer. We must lay to heart these scripture teachings. We need to reflect on how we live and work among others. We need to let the word we have received work within us to produce a spiritual bonding substance, energy we can use to link ourselves to others and to God. That means we must be open to

new visions of the word. We must be open to those who might help us learn, help us produce even greater spiritual energy so we can add new links to our chain of love.

FAITH SHARING AND INTEGRATION

(The community pauses in silence for several minutes to ponder the scriptures and the questions that follow.)

- ◆ How do you react when others try to control you?
- ◆ When has the leadership style of another inspired you to work harder or pray more sincerely?
- ◆ What steps do you feel you as a member of this small Christian community need to take in order to help others in the group express themselves more freely?
- ◆ As a group, what do you think we need to do to enhance the feelings of God's presence among us as we meet together?
- ◆ What is humility? When do you find it difficult to be humble?

RESPONSE IN ACTION

Suggestions:

- ◆ Link your small Christian community with other groups in your parish. Together, invite a leader of another faith to a meeting. Ask that person to share ways in which he or she feels your two faiths can link up in love. Discuss ways in which both faiths are reaching out to the *have-nots* in your community.
- ◆ With the other small Christian communities in your parish, plan a get-together with a less fortunate group in your community. Be sure that all participants contribute to the preparation and execution of the get-together.

- ◆ Visit a shelter or soup kitchen. Make it a point while there, not just to assist with food or meal distribution, but make it a point to speak with people one-on-one.

SENDING FORTH AND CLOSING PRAYER

(The facilitator passes out the unmarked paper chain links. He/she asks members to write on a link the name of a person or group that they find particularly difficult to accept or forgive. As they finish their links, members should connect them to the unfinished chain that rests on the table. This activity should be done in reflective silence. When all have finished, members are invited to share the name they placed on their link, the reasons they have found it difficult to love that person or group and some step they hope to take to move closer to bridge the gap. The session closes with members linking hands and praying the Lord's Prayer.)

