

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 5th SUNDAY OF EASTER (A) APRIL 20, 2008

Acts 6: 1-7 Psalm 33 1 Peter 2: 4-9 John 14: 1-12

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Maybe it is because the weather these days has been dreary. Or, maybe the world situation has me feeling under a cloud and my mood is pessimistic. But I want to ask, “What happened? Was it our fault?” Jesus promises his disciples at the Last Supper that, “Whoever believes in me will do the works that I do, and will do greater than these because I am going to the Father.”

As I preach in various locations around the country I am heartened by the witness of wonderful clergy, staff, volunteers and faithful people in the pews. Often they are straining to do the enormous work that running a vibrant parish requires. Unfortunately, I also see parishes where the numbers and resources have dwindled so severely that the threat of imminent closure hangs in the air at every gathering. So, I want to ask: What’s going on? Where are all the wonderful works Jesus promised we would do in his name? If they were more obvious wouldn’t they draw people to our churches to join us in worship and in our efforts to build a more just and compassionate world? Are we to blame for what, in some places, seems to be a lackluster presence of Jesus in his church?

I acknowledge we are all sinners, limited, human, distracted and tempted. We are also like the disciples of Jesus’ day who would use success and power to our own benefit and esteem. Maybe too much measurable success would just go to our heads and cause us to think we are faithful and fruitful disciples because we can count large numbers in the pews and point to the splendor of our recently constructed sanctuary with its loans already paid off. I sense from the gospel that those would be inappropriate measurements of how well we are living the life Jesus invited us to lead.

If I were going to measure my discipleship and our success as Jesus’ church, I should do so by the standards John enumerates in the previous chapter. There Jesus washes his disciples’ feet (13: 1-17). Then Jesus asks if they understand what he just did: the Master just performed the service of the lowliest servant in the house—he washed their feet. Maybe that’s a clue to the “great works” Jesus says we will

do because we believe in him. He is with God now and his Spirit is driving his “washed” disciples to imitate him.

I may be looking in all the wrong places to evaluate the church’s success. Success may be the wrong criteria to use. I shall have to look beneath the surface of seeming failure and insignificance for the signs of Jesus’ working through his followers. Are people being served; are the least welcomed; are the disciples following the Teacher who washed feet and gave his life for those he served? That’s not a success story by my worldly standards; but the One who stripped, knelt down with water, pitcher, bowl and towel to wash feet, might disagree.

The apostles in our Acts reading seem to have learned their foot-washing lesson well. There was conflict in the early church between those people who spoke Hebrew (Aramaic?) And those who spoke Greek. In other words, some were very immersed in their Jewish identity, while others had adapted to the more universal Greco-Roman culture. It doesn’t take much imagination to picture the squabbles that were going on at the time.

Sometimes Acts depicts a rather idyllic views of the early church. The Sunday after Easter we heard how, “all who believed it were together and had all things in common. They would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one’s need” (Acts2: 42-47). True for some, I am sure. But today’s reading from Acts gives us a fuller, more realistic glimpse into the first-generation church. And I am glad, because the fuller picture, with its virtues and divisions, sounds more like the church to which I belong. We are saints and sinners--- or, at least, squabblers. They had problems and so do we.

Their conflicts weren’t just about who got a share of the food—it went deeper. The Hellenists, who wanted more of a share in the community’s leadership and decision making, were a threat to those of Jewish origins. They were in Jerusalem where the Temple was, the heart of the faith of those raised in Judaism. These people continued to claim those religious traditions and practices. They cherished their roots, as well they should. They couldn’t imagine giving up their traditions, even though their faith in Jesus might require it. Their mission might even require their moving out of Jerusalem into a larger and more diverse world to spread the name of Jesus.

I am somewhat relieved to hear of Acts' description of the early church's "dark side." As I said, it sounds true to my experience. In today's church we have similar divisions. Recent parishes I have been to have worshipping communities who speak English, Vietnamese, Spanish, two Chinese dialects, and Tagalog. Even the Spanish communities in the same parish, had diverse customs and dialects—Cubans, Mexicans, Guatemalans, Nicaraguans, etc. In some parishes staff and resources were used to address, not only the cultural and lingual diversities, but the racial and economic ones as well. (My hat is off to parish staffs and communities who are trying to meet the many needs of their diverse peoples. I don't know how you do it!)

But in other faith communities the divisions are more strident and off-putting. There are conflicts and "turf wars," and divisions about: liturgical practices, expenditure of funds, conservative and liberal ecclesiology, fundamentalism and on and on. We still have "Hellenists" and "Hebrews" in various guises in our church.

I turn to the early church and ask: So, how did they do the works Jesus did and "greater ones than these?" I think they followed Jesus' example and were willing to wash feet. First of all, they were honest in acknowledging the differences among them. They didn't gloss over them or pretend they didn't exist. Nor did they step back and leave the problems for others or later generations to solve. They rolled up their sleeves and honestly faced what, at heart, was a power struggle.

The early church leaders we hear about in the first reading from Acts were willing to share their power. They chose other leaders to serve those who were powerless, the widows. Notice that the apostles didn't pass on only the tasks of food distribution to others. One of those chosen was the courageous and outspoken Stephen who will soon do what the apostles wanted to do—preach the Word.

Today's scriptures challenge those of us who have power in the church to share it with others. Another phenomenon I encounter as an itinerant preacher, besides faithful and hard-working volunteers is a large number of educated believers willing and anxious to serve in parish leadership roles. And more. There is a growing number of second-career churchgoers who have pursued pastoral and theological studies. For the most part, they are available to serve in church ministry, if we make room for them. I think we can do more to identify,

encourage, support and acknowledge their gifts in the community. We must do what the apostles did. They were willing to share power with the seven who were seen to be “filled with the Spirit and wisdom.”

I realize the seven chosen were all men. Perhaps that was culturally appropriate for their time. But such exclusion of women with their gifts and willingness to serve, is inexcusable today. Our church has a way to go to truly follow Jesus’ foot-washing example and the willingness of the apostles to share power.

Let us not forget that those chosen by the apostles were to serve the needs of neglected widows, some of whom, we can presume, had children. Women and children were in need and the church stepped up to the task. This is “Child Abuse Prevention Month.” Today would be a good day to address the needs of those in our midst who are abused and often ignored. They need our voice and actions on their behalf. For help in this preaching, I suggest fr. Chuck Dahmn’s suggestions on our webpage (Cf. Below).

CHECK OUR WEBPAGE

April is “**Child Abuse Prevention Month.**” It is estimated that 1 of 4 girls and 1 of 7 boys are abused before their 18th birthday. 60 million people in America are victims of child sexual abuse. That means that some of those victims are almost certainly listening to our preaching. We have posted a homily by Chuck Dahmn, OP, in English and Spanish, on child sexual abuse on our webpage: <https://PreacherExchange.com> (Go to “Justice Preaching”) The homily has an introduction connecting the issue to the scriptures for each of the four Sundays of April. The Good Shepherd reading, 2nd Sunday of April, would be a most appropriate moment for this preaching.

QUOTABLE

Grace means you’re in a different universe from where you had been stuck, when you had absolutely no way to get there on your own.

----Anne Lamott

ENVIRONMENTAL PRAYER

As we breathe the very air which sustains us,
We remember your love, God, which gives us life.

Fill us with your compassion for Creation.
Empty us of apathy, selfishness and fear,
of all pessimism and hesitation.

Breathe into us solidarity with all who suffer now
and the future generations who will suffer
because of our environmental irresponsibility.

Move us into action to save our earth
and to build your sustainable Kingdom. Amen.

Jane Deren (Quoted in "Social Justice News, "Diocese of Oakland, Ca.)

This year, **Earth Day** is April 22. For resources to celebrate the day, see

<http://www.earthday.net>

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

**"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own."
(1 Peter 2:9)**

In the opening paragraphs of *Faithful Citizenship* our US Catholic Bishops list some of the ways we are called to be "a chosen race, a holy nation". The Bishops' words are powerful and illuminate our responsibility as Catholic Christians to be part of the political process so that we truly "may announce the praises of him who called (us) out of darkness into his wonderful light."

<http://www.faithfulcitizenship.org/>

"We are a nation founded on 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,' but the right to life itself is not fully protected, especially for unborn children, the most vulnerable members of the American family."

"We are called to be peacemakers in a nation at war."

“We are a country pledged to pursue “liberty and justice for all,” but we are too often divided across lines of race, ethnicity, and economic inequality.”

“We are a nation of immigrants, struggling to address the challenges of many new immigrants in our midst.”

“We are a society built on the strength of our families, called to defend marriage and offer moral and economic supports for family life.”

“We are a powerful nation in a violent world, confronting terror and trying to build a safer, more just, more peaceful world.”

“We are an affluent society where too many live in poverty and lack health care and other necessities of life.”

“We are part of a global community facing urgent threats to the environment that must sustain us.”

Bishop Burbidge (Raleigh, NC) has also written on *Faithful Citizenship*.

“As our state and nation move towards an important series of elections, I write to encourage you to participate as faithful citizens in the electoral process. As Americans, we live in a free and pluralistic nation, with its many voices and points of view. As Catholics, we are called upon to make moral choices ever faithful to the Gospel. The upcoming elections will provide an opportunity to exercise these moral choices, especially for the protection of the unborn and all human life.

“I encourage you to build a world where, with God’s grace, the respect for all human life and the unborn is paramount; where the dignity of all persons will be protected and issues on behalf of peace and justice will be promoted.” (*March 28, 2008, Bishop Michael Burbidge*)

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty." *If the inmate responds, you might consider becoming pen pals.*

Please write to:.....

William Herring #0180479 (On death row since 7/22/95)

Leslie Warren #0487180 (10/6/95)

Darrell Strickland #0393145 (10/27/95)

--Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. Two new CDs Available: **"FIRST IMPRESSIONS PREACHING REFLECTIONS"**

"Liturgical year A," which begins in Advent and contains two reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts for the year. It also has 15 book reviews and additional essays related to preaching.

"Liturgical years, A, B and C," reflections on the three-year cycle.

If you are a preacher, lead a Lectionary-based scripture group, or are a member of a liturgical team, these CDs will be helpful in your preparation process. Individual worshipers report they also use these reflections as they prepare for Sunday liturgy.

You can order the CDs by going to our webpage: www.preacherexchange.com and clicking on the "First Impressions" CDs link on the left.

2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use "First Impressions" in their ministry and for personal use. Others

respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)

3. Our webpage: <https://www.preacherexchange.com>

Where you will find “Preachers’ Exchange,” which includes "First Impressions" and “Homilias Dominicales,” as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.

4. “Homilias Dominicales”-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Jose David Padilla, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like “First Impressions”, “Homilias Dominicales” are a preacher’s early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive “Homilias Dominicales” drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: Jboll@opsouth.org or jboll@preacherexchange.org

5. "First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

DONATIONS

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA

P.O. Box 12927, Raleigh, N.C. 27605, (919) 833-1893, Email: judeop@juno.com