

First Impressions 6th SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 8: 5-8, 14-17 Psalm 66 1 Peter 3: 15-18 John 14: 15-21

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Acts tells us today that through Philip's preaching, "Samaria had accepted the word of God." It is stated in such a matter-of-fact way, as if it were just a common event in their lives. That the Samaritans accepted Philip's preaching might not take us by surprise, for we are a long way from them in time and space, but it certainly must have caused the apostles' jaws to drop in awe and surprise. We have heard of the Samaritans in the New Testament. Some show up in the narratives, we may think that they were just part of the landscape of daily life. But they weren't.

Samaritans are mentioned in the New Testament. John recounts the story of the woman Jesus encounters at the well, when he paused for water in Samaritan territory (4:1-42). For the most part, the Samaritans lived around Mt. Gerizim. But some New Testament stories show some of them living among the Jews in their villages (Mt. 10: 5; Lk. 9:52). So, why would the apostles be taken by surprise at the news that the Samaritans had accepted the Word of God?

Jews and Samaritans had common roots, but they feuded with one another over matters religious and legal. They also argued over the proper place for worship. The Jews claimed it was in Jerusalem; the Samaritans said it was on their Mt. Gerizim. The arguments weren't just verbal, they boiled over into physical attacks and skirmishes. (There's much more to their differences and the sources of their conflicts and a good Bible dictionary would have more information for you.)

The book is called "The Acts of the Apostles," but a more accurate name would be "The Acts of the Spirit." As we hear Acts through this Easter season, right up to Pentecost, it is clear that the Spirit is the main "character" in Acts. Luke's second volume began with Jesus' instruction to the disciples that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them and then they would be Jesus' witnesses, "throughout Judea and Samaria, yes even to the ends of the earth" (1:8). The disciples remained together and prayed until they were given the Spirit on Pentecost.

That day is gone, but Acts shows, in various ways, that the Spirit continued to be poured out on the disciples (4: 33-35; 8:17). They followed Jesus' commissioning and were his witnesses. Philip did just that in, of all places, Samaria and people there responded to this Spirit-filled and Spirit-sent preacher. In the gospel accounts these early apostles were hardly models of fire, dedication and courage. But now,

after Pentecost, we see in them what the Spirit can do.

We got to be Christians because the Spirit did what Jesus said he/she would do: come upon the first disciples and make them witnesses of Christ, "to Samaria, yes even to the ends of the earth." We are the "ends-of-the-earth" people; the result of the preaching mission of those first anointed with the Spirit. God's Spirit is not restricted to any one time and place. As Pentecost approaches we are reminded that we, no less than the first Spirit-anointed disciples, also have the Spirit. The Spirit continues to bear witness through us of the life, death and resurrection of Christ.

While it was Jesus' intention that his disciples would go to Samaria, what instigated the outreach? The preaching wasn't simply the result of the apostles' planning. The passage preceding today's tells us that the church was persecuted and scattered as a result of Stephen's preaching in Jerusalem (8: 1-3). While Christians suffered under the persecution, that did not hinder the work of the Spirit. In fact, the Spirit was with the persecuted Christians and used their dissemination to other places as a way to spread the Good News.

God doesn't cause our misfortunes. But when they happen, God can work through them and use us as witnesses to faith. We observe some people who are seriously ill and marvel at their courage and doggedness. How do they do it?, we wonder. What enables them to go on and not become discouraged and bitter? Then we notice a worn bible and prayer books by their bedside; the regular visits of a eucharistic minister bringing them communion and words of support from parishioners; family and friends who assure the infirmed of regular prayers and visits. Word gets out on the hospital ward about "that Christian woman who is so sick, yet is a cheerful and gracious patient." It's a familiar story: a misfortune becomes the vehicle through which the Spirit empowers still one more witness to Christ's suffering, death and resurrection. It is also an ancient story that goes back to the persecution the first generations of Christians endured, which became the impetus for them to go out and witness to Christ, starting "throughout Judea and Samaria and yes, even to the ends of the earth (1:8).

A side note; it is puzzling that Peter and John had to follow-up on Philips' baptism of the Samaritans, so that they could receive the Holy Spirit. We shouldn't make too much of this. Some commentators think it was Luke's way of showing that the gospel's spread wasn't by chance but instead was very much part of God's plan. As the community grows in Acts, there are other moments of "official recognition" by leaders of the church. This happens with Cornelius (Acts 10) and John the Baptist's Ephesian disciples (19: 1-7). We shouldn't over emphasize the separation between baptism and the coming of the Spirit that some might deduce from this passage.

Paraclete/Advocate means "called to the side of." Jesus promises to send his disciples "another Advocate" to remain with them. Literally--- to stand by their side. The Advocate is the Holy Spirit and, just as Jesus stood by the side of his disciples in their need and for their instruction, so the Advocate will remain with them and will continue Jesus' work through them. If we have a Spirit who is an Advocate, then this Spirit animates us to be advocates for others. There are many ways to do this, but generally we advocates stand by the side of those who need us; who need our voice, influence and support. We also stand up for those who are being unjustly criticized and ostracized. For example, we are told how immigrants are a "drain on our resources," and how they are taking job away from native born Americans. Not so. In fact, reliable studies show that immigrants help create jobs instead of take them away.

[During Lent, Chuck Dahmn, OP proposed a series of preachings on immigration. For more information on immigration go to our webpage ("Justice Preaching"—Archive for Lent http://www.judeop.org/preaching_immigration_during_lent.htm)]

We need to stand with those who need an advocate. This presumes we will, in some way, be a part of their lives and not stand at a distance from them. Jesus says he won't leave us orphans. Since we have his Spirit we, in turn, can not leave others orphans or defenseless.

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: www.judeop.org (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

Justine Dalencourt, a French Quaker, was forced to leave her home at Fontaine-Levaganne when the German army invaded France in 1914. But first she planted a garden, saying, "I would rather they found something to eat at my house than they should have to steal from others."

See her kneeling, covering the last seed. Patting down the moist soil. The warm spring sun. the full scent of the earth rising to her. The odd and distant thunder.

Then standing, turning, walking away.

----Philip Harnden

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Philip Harnden, *JOURNEYS OF SIMPLICITY: TRAVELING LIGHT WITH THOMAS MERTON, BASHO, EDWARD ABBEY, ANNIE DILLARD AND OTHERS*. Woodstock, Vermont: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2003, ISBN, 1-893361-76-4, \$16.95.

This is a small pocket book of vignettes of forty travelers and the few things they took with them on their trips—geographical trips and life journeys. I read this during a retreat, a little at a time. It invites us to travel light and to travel with an inner light guiding our path. I hate to mention the "practical side" of this inspirational book--- but the stories would make great preaching examples.

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

"Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope...." (1 Peter 3:15)

For those who work in service to the poor, the disenfranchised, and for peace in our world, "hope" can seem an illusion. For those of us who simply try to live in love and forgiveness with our families, our neighbors, our parish communities and our church, "hope" can be something we often lose. *How can we be always ready to explain our hope?*

Several weeks ago, we experienced the tragic and violent death of Eve Carson, a charismatic student leader at the University of Chapel Hill. At her funeral, her father asked that his words be read. He "gave an explanation for the reason for his hope" in the very heart of his grief at the death of his daughter. He said:

"I see a stunningly beautiful convergence of talent and caring in this, our children's generation. I believe these kids, along with their peers around the globe, can reach reasoned solutions for mitigating violence and tackling many of the inequities of poverty, prejudice, inadequate health care and under-education. They're more productive because they collaborate and communicate like no generation before them. And what is even more wonderful is their generosity. Isn't that tremendous?"

As Christians, our hope is in the God revealed by Jesus... a God who never stops loving us and who never stops turning all our deaths into new life. This is the Easter proclamation.

Pope Benedict's latest encyclical is on the topic of hope. In paragraph 35 Pope Benedict says: *"All serious and upright human conduct is hope in action. It is*

important to know that I can always continue to hope, even if in my own life, or the historical period in which I am living, there seems to be nothing left to hope for. Only the great certitude of hope that my own life and history in general, despite all failures, are held firm by the indestructible power of Love, and that this gives them their meaning and importance, only this kind of hope can then give the courage to act and
t o p e r s e v e r e . "
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi_en.html

Did you Know?

Parishes are ***communités of hope*** where we gather together to celebrate the life, death and Resurrection of Jesus as we live those events out in our own lives and in the shared life of our community.

Parish ministries are ***signs of hope*** to those who are served by them; food for the hungry, help for those in financial crisis, employment for those newly released from prison, friendship and community for those still incarcerated, support for those suffering from homelessness or AIDS, welcome for refugees, and many others. **If you are not already a participating member, consider joining one of our many parish ministries.**

(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:.....

Jerry Dale Hill #0511057 (On death row since 10/31/95)

Keith B. East #0511998 (11/8/95)

John D. Mc Neil #0275678 (11/10/95)

---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 **three** reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts for the year. It also has 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: <http://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