

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 15th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A)

Isaiah 55: 10-11 Psalm 65 Romans 8: 18-23 Matthew 13:1-23

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Though it is early in my preparation, I am a step or two closer to a homily than usual. While I don't believe in providing homilies for others to preach, nevertheless, I thought I would share where I am at this point. I hope it will stimulate your own reflections.

When I was young, if you asked someone if they did windows people didn't automatically think of the Microsoft kind. They knew you meant glass windows. A while back, when we had friends volunteer to help us straighten up the house they jokingly said, “But we don't do windows!” And I responded, “But I do.” I like doing windows. You apply a good window spray to the surface, crumble a few pages from an old newspaper and wipe it clean. (I learned the newspaper method a long time ago from my mother, who said it gave a nice shine, and saved on paper towels.)

I like doing windows because you get good, immediate and tangible results—you have the dirt and soot of “the before” and in a brief time, you have the neat, squeaky clean of “the after.” Windows, mirrors, windshields, hand them over, I'll get to work on them and after I am finished, I will step back and admire my work. I see the results before me....NOW!

After all, how many areas of our lives can we say we have such predictability, control and clear positive results? Are you like me and like at least some things in your life to be predictable...within your grasp...under your control...providing you with a sense of order, accomplishment and being in charge? While I don't think I am a “control freak,” there certainly is something to be said about being in charge of at least a part of our lives. I watched my sister straighten up a room in her house where her grandchildren's toys are stored. She put the toys away, put away some clothes and rearranged their tiny chairs. Before she left the room she looked back over her shoulder to give it one last admiring glance. A few minutes later her two year old grandson came with my niece for a visit, he went straight to the toys and returned the room to its former chaos. But even for that brief period, I

think my sister had a sense of control and efficiency, for a moment, at least, things in one part of her life were just as she wanted them.

Periodically we humans are shaken awake and realize any control we exert over our existence is minimal indeed. It is at best, temporary, for eventually something happens to remind us we are not in charge. There seem to be other forces in the world lined up against us. I had a fifty year old friend who, out of the blue, started bunking into things. Her speech suddenly began to slur and concerned friends took her to the doctor. Within a few days she was in emergency surgery for a rapidly spreading brain tumor.

I hear on the news that General Motors is going to down-size about 25, 000 jobs. United Airlines is trying to get out of paying pensions and health care for retired employees. We are told that the economy is on an upswing, but still we know people who once had comfortable jobs who are now looking for work and using their life savings to support their families until they do get work. I have visited young people in their twenties in prison doing hard time. Their life stories through their teens might have been pretty ordinary, but then they did something foolish when they were 19 or 20 and now their futures are made bleak by long prison sentences.

No matter how we experience these life-altering situation: by a sudden turn in our once-comfortable lives; by a tragedy in someone else's; or by seeing a tv news story that leaves us feeling another's pain and our own vulnerability-----in many ways, we are reminded that there seems to be an element of chaos in the world. The ground we stand on is not as secure as it may seem and sometimes it feels like we are tossing dice in our lives, hoping for a winning result.

The sower in today's parable lives in a world of chance; one would even say, chaos. At first glance his future doesn't look encouraging. The work that occupies his day is not a hobby. He is not spending leisure time planting a backyard herb garden. This is vital business he is about. He will have to feed his wife, children and maybe his extended family from the fruit of this sowing. The crowd that gathers to hear this parable could well identify with the daily struggle to survive.

Yet, he seems to be careless, even wasteful, in his sowing. Plus, outside forces

are lined up against him. The parable spells it out in vivid detail for us: some seed fell on the path and was gobbled up by hungry birds; some seed fell on rocky ground that had no depth and soon perished under the punishing sun; other seed fell among thorns and had the life choked out of them. In this sowing, 3 out of 4 castings were wasted; only a part of the seed landed on good soil. This farmer doesn't appear to be having a very good day.

We certainly can identify with the farmer's life struggle: the waste of good effort; the loss of what we can't afford to lose; the unpredictable nature of this life; the turn of events that might spell the difference between having enough to eat and going without...for some, maybe even starving. The dice are tossed and we just might come up losing.

But the last part of the sowing turns the story on its head. When ordinary farmers of the day would have expected 8, 10 or 15 fold from a planting, Jesus says the last part of the sowing yields a 100, 60 or 30 fold! "Impossible!" would have been the response of any experienced farmer. The yield would have been beyond the wildest dreams of any farmer hearing this parable. At first glance, what looks like a disaster can, nevertheless, yield a surprise. It is obvious Jesus sees another factor at work in our lives. He addresses the crowds around him and us too, "Let everyone heed what he or she hears."

It is as if he is saying. "Pay close attention, you may think you have evidence for the negative expectations you have, but look more closely at your lives and see the possibility for hope." We can put confidence in God, despite signs to the contrary. The Word that is planted in our spirits can bear enormous and surprising results during times of testing. The odds seemed against the sower, but there was a surprise element in the story and the result was a harvest beyond human expectation.

There's a second message for us who have "ears to hear" this parable. Jesus is speaking to crowds. He is the sower casting his words to anyone who would hear him. He is sowing his word recklessly, so it seems, to many who will not accept it. But some few will, a seeming insignificant group, at first. Those who accept his words: can't be measured by the world's standard of success; don't have power or the influence in the towns and cities where they live; aren't the wheeler dealers, the movers and shakers. They may even hear people say to them, "Well, a lot of

good your faith does you...you lost your job, you got sick, your son or daughter is a failure.”

But what seems like a small, fragile seed of faith in our lives, will yield a rich and a surprising harvest of: strength, when we normally would have been weak; hope, despite painful events that would have caused discouragement; faith, in the face of powerful forces lined up against us that make us feel small and fragile. We are the disciples who heed Jesus’ word---and we trust. Despite appearances, we continue to work on Jesus’ dream for the world; we continue to look for the surprises that show us that someone else’s hand is in ours, working to bring to harvest what has been planted.

As I said, I like to do windows. It is a neat, orderly and predictable labor. As for the rest of life: so far from predictable; so less orderly; so less efficient, I will trust that, despite appearances, some things are going to work out--- some day. Some good seed sown will sprout and harvest beyond expectation, beyond our wildest dreams. It won’t be measurable in dollars and cents, but rather, in the deep parts of our lives where real life is. After all, the One who tells us this parable today, knows our God will see to a harvest.

I was thinking of a reflective question or two to accompany this preaching. “What struggle to do good are we involved in that seems, at this time, to be fruitless and frustrating?” “Have you ever seen someone or some effort surprise you and finally bear abundant fruit?”

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Larry Hollar, (ed.), HUNGER FOR THE WORD: LECTIONARY REFLECTIONS ON FOOD AND JUSTICE, YEAR A. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004), ISBN 0-8146-2920-2, paper, \$19.95.

Ecumenical reflections on the Sunday readings with the focus on hunger and justice. A variety of professors, pastors and Bread for the Word activists look at issues of world hunger through scriptural lens. Raises the justice themes pertinent to our times while underlining the abundant grace available for us to make significant changes in our world.

QUOTABLE

Children’s Time

This week's parable of the sower, along with the story of the mustard seed in the weeks ahead, offers a chance to develop some seed-based themes, which have useful connections to hunger. Today you might bring in several containers with dirt, some with rocks clearly visible, some with weeds already grown up. Some with rich, fertile soil. (If you've thought about this well in advance, you might even have planted some seed so you can illustrate the result.) Ask which of these is likely to allow seeds to grow into strong and healthy and productive plants. Say that God wants our lives to flourish too and that God hopes we can receive the words God gives us in the Bible and use them as we love other people.

--- HUNGER FOR THE WORD: LECTIONARY REFLECTIONS ON FOOD AND JUSTICE, YEAR A, page 142.

JUSTICE NOTES

Every morning as the escalator slowly brings me up from the below-ground Metro stop at Union Station in Washington, D.C., I see the very top of the U.S. Capitol. And the surrounding area known as Capitol Hill. It has become my field of dreams for hungry and poor people. Our advocacy work for hungry people is much like sowing seeds. Just like winter, spring, summer and fall, Congress has its seasons as well. This field has 535 acres: 425 members of the House and 100 senators. Our job is to sow seeds on each acre.

—Rev. Donald DiXon Williams, HUNGER FOR THE WORD: LECTIONARY REFLECTIONS ON FOOD AND JUSTICE, YEAR A, page 140

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

“Can you imagine what it's like to have your boy on death row? Can you imagine what it's like to visit him there every Saturday and tell him, ‘I love you. I'll see you next week,’ when you never know if they're going to call and say, ‘He's up next—it's time for his execution.’”

----Jeanetter Johnson, Mother of Alan Gell, who was retried and found innocent because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree murder.

[The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

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."

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

Elias H. Syriani #0398002 (On death row since 6/13/91)

Henry L. Mc Collum #0265106 (11/22/91)

Clinton R. Rose # 0351933 (12/19/91)

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

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: **"FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR A."** The CD contains two reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of the year. In addition, there are helpful essays for preaching during the liturgical seasons (Advent, Lent, the Triduum, etc.), ten book reviews and essays on various aspects of preaching. The files are in three formats (Microsoft Word, WordPerfect and Adobe Acrobat Reader) so you should have no trouble opening them on your computer. To purchase go to: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> click on the "Year A-CD" button on the right and follow the instructions.
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 webpages: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> and <http://www.opsouth.org/> (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,

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