

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 17th SUNDAY (A)

1 Kings 3: 5, 7-12 Psalm 119 Romans 8: 28-30 Matthew 13: 44-52

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

You arrive home one night after a long day at work, or having taking the kids to soccer, or sitting through a long exam. You fumble with the keys to the house and wonder where the rest of the family is, the house is dark. Finally you get the door open, the lights come on, and all your friends and family are there shouting, “Surprise!” Your birthday isn’t for another week, they really got you. You thought it was going to be a routine day, with a weekday night supper waiting. Instead it turned out to be a blast! Friends have brought your favorite food, your family gives you the nicest gifts and, what’s more, they tell you how much they love you. There’s music--- and lets not forget your favorite wines. They really know how to celebrate your life. Makes you glad to be alive and, even though the old routine will return tomorrow, it won’t be quite the same. “Surprise!”

Jesus’ version of the surprise party shows up in parables. After each parable, someone should shout, “Surprise!” These stories and images catch you off guard. The parables have you look again at everyday events and, with the help of a parable’s lens, you see life is really charged with God’s surprising presence; in the most unlikely places and among the most unlikely people. At God’s party, the guests look around and are bewildered when they see who else was is there. Who would have thought he would have gotten invited? And I never thought I’d ever be with her at a party--- and enjoy her presence so much! You can’t escape the surprises in the parables we have been hearing these past three weeks from Matthew’s 13th. chapter. Today’s parables are good examples of the surprise party the reign of God is.

In the parable of the treasure in the field, Jesus risks using a conniving character who reburies a treasure in a field that is not his and buys the field to get the treasure. It must have been such an obviously valuable treasure to cause him to sell everything he had to buy the field---and with joy. No groaning, grunting sacrifice here! The lucky guy knows what he has come upon; it makes everything else he has saved and treasured immediately dispensable— everything is sold now that he has come upon a real treasure.

I have to rethink my treasures, run an honest eye over the landscape of my own life. What do I consider special and valuable? Are they really so valuable in the light of buying the field with its treasure? What sacrifice must I make to refocus my life for a better treasure? Have I overinvested in work and career and put off the treasure of my family? In one way or another, a lot of us have invested in a “field”. But is that where the lasting treasure truly lies for me? Will I go to dig up that treasure someday in my field and find it gone? Valueless? Or, no longer worth the time and effort I put into it? What a sad and lonely surprise party that will be!

The second short parable about the long-sort “pearl of great price,” has a similar experience of discovery. Again a sacrifice is required, and again the sacrifice aspect is not emphasized. The discovery of something you have wanted and been looking for is so joyful, the sought-after prize so rewarding, it is well worth putting everything else you thought was valuable aside. Both parables underline discovery, joy and the necessary action to get the treasured object. When we find God, we need to pull out all the stops. These parables are not about half measures, compromises and putting off decisions. For the half-hearted among us, the eucharistic meal may help us gather strength to recommit ourselves more fully to the Parable Teller who has let us in on a wisdom that can alter our lives and guide us more fully towards him and his reign.

I need to be more open-eyed in daily life, looking for the surprising ways God’s presence jumps out from the everyday. I pray that when this revelation happens, I am willing to invest my day--my life--- to serving it. What a surprise it has been to be caught off guard by God, to be surprised into kingdom awareness when:

- in the Special Olympics’ footrace, a winning youngster notices his friend has tripped, stops to help him up and they both run across the finish line in a tie
- the unruly student I had in high school sophomore religion class graduates college to dedicate her life to the poor in Ruanda
- the elderly woman looks up from her wheelchair and smiles and I wonder if she knows something I don’t about the pleasures of life
- the classical music class I reluctantly took in high school, continues to affect my love of music now and fills me with gratitude for the wonders God has planted in artists
- I go visit a friend in prison and return with a sense of God I cannot possibly

attribute to my own goodness, but to something that happened there in the drab and noisy maximum security visiting room

- my early failures turn out to be the gifts that caused me to re-evaluate and redirect my life to the much better choices I'm glad I made

I have tripped more than once over the treasure in the field, found the sought-after pearl of great price or discovered that what the net dragged in really is a feast.

Jesus surely told many other parables not written in the gospels. I wonder what made Matthew save these? When you look at what he saved and left for his church community, you get the impression there were some things that needed addressing. Last week we heard about the “weeds and wheat” in the same field. Today it's a net which collects “fish of every kind.” The “bad” are thrown out, eventually; as were last week's weeds that an enemy sowed in the field. Both parables about the reign of God reflect the early church (“net” or “field”) and suggest the community was experiencing a mixture of the good and bad among them---- at least what some thought were the good and bad. It doesn't take much imagination to look at our own “net and field” church today and see similar issues. What a mess! Of course we have to do the best to deal with the problems. Jesus wants us to be responsible. But at the same time, both parables repeat a cautionary message.

To the slaves who wanted to rip up the weeds right away (13: 24-30), the householder orders them to wait. They really don't know what they are doing and will rip up the valuable grain in its early stages. Let things wait until another group who will know better, the “harvesters,” do the sorting. It's the same with the net that gathers both acceptable and unacceptable fish. When the full net is finally pulled in, then sorting will happen. We would protest. We know who the trouble makers are, let's get rid of them! Let's streamline the church to be a better operating, more exemplary group of disciples who better reflect God's holiness. But Jesus spells out his plan and his assurance quite clearly, “Thus it will be at the end of the age. The angels will go out and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace....”

So, as much as we think we know how to get things in shape, how to plant, maintain and gather the harvest better--- how to get our teachings, church life and liturgical practices uniform and with 100% agreement---it is just not in our hands.

We'll do our best at discipleship. We'll guide other members as best we can and teach our children to be faithful followers. But we will avoid rash judgment and impatience based on our own distinctions of right and wrong church behavior and membership. Later, at the end, when God directs the sorting process, we might be surprised at who, after all, were the truly acceptable disciples. Maybe not the "fish" we had in mind.

Another note about the judgment scene in this and other parables. They make it clear that the judgment will not be put off forever. Separation will come, though it seems, from our vantage, to be a long way off. Parables like this, the one about the weeds and wheat and the one later in Matthew about the Last Judgement (chapter 25), have a graced intent. They remind us to look to our lives. We cannot procrastinate forever, living distracted lives. Do we realize what we have found in God's reign? Has it deeply affected our lives, given us a sense of priorities, filled us with gratitude for having been "netted" for God? We have "found" what we really need and have searched for all our lives. In these parables Jesus wants to make us wise "scribes" of the reign of God.

Jesus asks his disciples, "Do you understand all these things?" They answer, "Yes." Well, they really don't usually understand what's going on, but Jesus accepts their answer. How and what do they understand? They are illiterate Galileans, no experts in the law of God, yet they have gotten insight by listening carefully to these parables. They contain wisdom for them (and us) and it's a free gift, whether they are religious experts or not. They are Christian scribes, wise in God's ways, who because of Jesus, have a rich storehouse of new and old from which to draw what they will need. Equipped with a parable-way-of seeing they can, as scribes traditionally did in their religion, interpret God's ways and teach them to others.

To the disciples, Solomon (the first reading) seemed like one of a kind, and he was. He had a reputation for a wisdom that sparkled in the ancient biblical texts. But now here is Jesus, offering the gift of wisdom to us by his teachings and life illuminated for us by the Holy Spirit. To hear these parables, and to ponder their meaning, brings God's wisdom to us, the descendants of those who first followed Jesus and whom he likened to the scribes. We are, he says, like the heads of households who know how to go down deep and bring up both the new and the old treasures we first found and invested our lives in.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

John R. Donahue, S.J., *THE GOSPEL IN PARABLE*. Fortress Press, 1988.
(Paper, \$16)

Since these Sundays have us reflecting on parables, you might want to look at John Donahue's book. It's an excellent book on the parables and what is so valuable for the us, is that Donahue has written it with the preacher in mind. His method is to place emphasis on the context of the parables and to show how their meaning is affected by the context of the Gospel in which they appear.

QUOTABLE

In the kingdom proclamation of Jesus, this parable may have served as a defense of his association with sinners and his unwillingness to establish a "pure Messianic community," as the "Psalms of Solomon" (first century B.C.) attests. The arrival of God's kingdom was to be marked by the separation of the good from the evil and the purification of the land. Jesus does not deny that such a separation will take place but disassociates it from his proclamation of the kingdom. Now is the time for the offer of mercy and forgiveness to the sinner. Those who will be "blessed of my Father" (Matt 25: 34) will be known only at the final judgment.

—page 67, *THE GOSPEL IN PARABLE*

JUSTICE NOTES

As individuals and as a nation, therefore, we are called to make a fundamental "option for the poor". The obligation to evaluate social and economic activity from the viewpoint of the poor and the powerless arises from the radical command to love one's neighbor as one's self. Those who are marginalized and whose rights are denied have privileged claims if society is to provide justice for all. This obligation is deeply rooted in Christian belief.

----U. S. Bishops, *ECONOMIC JUSTICE FOR ALL*, #87

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,

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