

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 23rd SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A)

Ezekiel 33: 7-9 Psalm 95 Romans 13: 8-10 Matthew 18: 15-20

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

We are in a section of Matthew’s gospel in which Jesus is doing community building. So, today’s passage must be seen in the light of its larger context. (Nothing new here for preachers since we are always checking out the context of a scriptural passage.) Ever since chapter 14, Jesus has been instructing his disciples. In chapter 18, his teaching emphasizes and focuses on the community of believers, the church.

At the time Matthew wrote, the church was on its own, no longer a part of the Jewish community and so no longer observing the daily norms and customs of that religious tradition. The community needed guidelines for its life together and in chapter 18 Matthew emphasizes what the important ones are. Faith in Jesus and his teachings are the basis for this new community; believers will have to live in a way that reflects their founder. Since Jesus revealed a forgiving and compassionate God, the life of the community must do the same, if they are to witness to Jesus resurrected and living in their midst. Forgiveness must be the hallmark of the church. (Next week Peter will ask, “...how often must I forgive?” Jesus’ response--- in effect, a limitless number of times.)

When someone offends us we can say, “It’s a big world, I’ll just go my own way and ignore him or her.” The early church was a very small community surrounded by non-believers. Members of the assemblies were easily recognizable and so was how they behaved towards one another. It’s something like a family in a small town, the neighbors quickly learn when there is conflict among family members. So too in the tiny early church; people within and outside the community would know of divisions among the believers. Conflicting members could not go their own way, the whole community would know and suffer the consequences of their behavior. The injuries had to be dealt with through forgiveness and, if it that were done, all would benefit. Outsiders would also notice the community’s behavior and be drawn to it. Today our larger communities might make it possible for conflict to continue, or be ignored, without too much fuss. But an unseen wound is a wound nevertheless and the unity and life of the believers are affected by

offenses done by members against one another.

The teaching in today's gospel sets out a rather elaborate and specific process for how forgiveness and reconciliation are to happen. At first just two people are involved, "If your brother [or sisters] sins against you go and tell...." Notice that the one sinned against must attempt a personal exchange with the offending party. At this stage of the process the privacy of the two is being respected. The directions don't include explicit formulas or directions how the conversation is to go. It is hoped the parties can converse reasonably and members can be trusted to know how to behave and what to say. But life doesn't always work out according to ideals.

If the first step fails, the conversation is to include just one or two more persons. We might jump ahead at this point to the closing verse of today's passage. "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them." We most commonly apply this passage to two or more believers praying together—Jesus will be in their midst. True enough. But back to the context. The verse is in the setting of reconciliation in the community; when "two or three" come together to settle an offense against a member. When a believing community works to settle disputes, Christ is in our midst working to achieve the same goal. That is what makes this teaching more than an "ideal" and keeps it from being dismissed as not practical in "the real world."

Or, put it another way. Where shall we find the true presence of Christ? In today's example, he is in our midst when we work together to right wrongs. Forgiveness and justice should characterize the community; if it does, others will recognize something unique about the church and might even recognize Christ alive and active in our midst doing what isn't "do-able" without him. We believe he is truly with us at this eucharistic celebration. We reflect on divisions in our local and universal church, as well as the between churches, resulting from offenses and misunderstandings done over the centuries. We invite Christ to be with us as we consciously and deliberately set about righting both large and small wrongs.

Jesus' instructions continue. If the offender is hardened and refuses to acknowledge the wrong the process moves to another level. "If he/she refuses to listen to them, tell the church." Here Jesus gives the whole community the power

to “bind and loosen”; the power to welcome back a repentant member, but also to discipline an unrepentant offender. The latter is an unfortunate but, it seems, necessary move. Actually, it isn’t so much that the church excludes someone from the community, but that the person guilty of sin against a member has turned his/her back on the community. Since they are obstinate in their sin, they have sentenced themselves to exclusion. If they won’t mend the breach they have caused, the community is forced to state the obvious. The offender must be treated as “a Gentile or a tax collector”—a catch-all phrase used at that time by the Jewish community to mean anyone considered unclean and outside the faith. But remember that Jesus welcomed Gentiles and tax collectors into his company and offered them God’s forgiveness and acceptance. I think that leaves his comment ambiguous.

We sense from this passage and all of chapter 18, that the unity and faithful adherence to Jesus’ teachings are important values for Matthew. Christians are not to live as individuals, but as members of a witnessing and supportive community. When a member has been “sinned” against, others are there for support and to see that rights are wronged.

But what’s the spirit of today’s gospel? Is Jesus just talking about individual offenses and sins? Suppose a race is sinned against, what are we to do? Suppose the poor on the other side of town are being ignored or deprived of their needs and rights? Suppose a group in our parish is treated as second class members just because they are new arrivals? Suppose women’s voices are ignored? Or, the elderly patronized? Suppose young people never hear their lives or issues mentioned in the preaching and public worship? Well...you get the idea.

There was a recent editorial in the New York Times that I think preachers can use. The title suggests the editorial writer might have seen more than the surface of things. I will quote it in full below and leave it to you to use it as you wish.

A MOMENT OF GRACE

In an age whose crabbed sense of justice finds expression in dismal phrases like “zero tolerance” and “three strikes and you’re out,” the events in a Long Island courtroom on Monday came as an undeserved gift, something startling and

luminous.

It happened when Ryan Cushing, a 19-year-old charged with assault for tossing a turkey through a car windshield last fall, approached the driver he nearly killed, Victoria Ruvolo. Ms. Ruvolo, 44, suffered severe injuries and needed many hours of surgery to rebuild her shattered facial bones.

When Mr. Cushing left the courtroom after pleading guilty, he came face to face with his victim for the first time. He said he was sorry and begged her to forgive him.

She did. She cradled his head as he sobbed. She stroked his face and patted his back, "It's O.K.; it's O.K.," she said. "I just want you to make your life the best it can be."

Mr. Cushing was one of six teenagers out for a night of joy riding and crime, which often happens when childish aggression and stupidity merge with the ability to drive and steal credit cards. The five others have pleaded guilty to various acts like forgery and larceny, but Mr. Cushing, who threw the turkey, could have faced 25 years in prison. At Ms. Ruvolo's insistence, prosecutors granted him a plea bargain instead: six months in jail and five years' probation.

The prosecutor, Thomas Spota, had been ready to seek harsh punishment for a crime he rightly denounced as heedless and brutal. "This is not an act of mere stupidity," Mr. Spota said. "They're not 9-or-7-year-old children."

That is true. But Ms. Ruvolo's resolute compassion, coming seemingly out of nowhere, disarmed Mr. Spota and led to a far more satisfying result.

Many have assumed that Ms. Ruvolo's motivation is religious. But while we can estimate the size of her heart, we can't peer into it. Her impulse may have been entirely secular.

Court testimony by crime victims is often pitched as a sort of retributive therapy, a way for angry, injured people to force criminals to confront their shame. But while some convicts grovel, others smirk. Many are impassive. It's hard to imagine that those hurt by crime reliably find healing in the courtroom. Given the opportunity for retribution, Ms. Ruvolo gave and got something better: the dissipation of anger and the restoration of hope, in a gesture as cleansing as the tears washing down her damaged face, and the faced of the foolish, miserable boy whose life she single-handedly restored.

---NY Times, Wednesday, August 17, 2005, page A18.

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:.....

James Campbell #0063592 (On death row since 7/8/93)

Daniel Gamer #0141374 (9/3/93)

Johnny R. Daughtry #0099090 (10/4/93)

---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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