

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 24th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A)
Sirach 27: 30-28:7 Psalm 103 Romans 14: 7-9 Matthew 18: 21-35
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

PRENOTE: HURRICANE KATRINA

I wrote the scriptural reflection for this Sunday just before the hurricane hit the Gulf states. I know we have all been following the tragic consequences of the wind and water with pain in our hearts for the victims. I would add a personal note, if I may.

I am a member of the Southern Dominican province. We have parishes and ministries in Louisiana, especially in New Orleans. Our provincial offices were in Metairie, at the edge of New Orleans. Our friars and Dominican sisters who were in New Orleans are displaced. We friars have been receiving daily email updates. I will share with you one of the recent emails we received from our brothers at our temporary provincial office in Irving, Texas. I ask for your prayers for all who are feeling and sharing the painful aftermath of Katrina.

To the Friars:

Just a taste of what we are looking at: 2 of our largest priories flooded. At least 25 brothers homeless and jobless. Provincial team homeless. Provincial office building flooded. All of our provincial and parish office workers homeless and several of them without cash on hand and with only the clothes on their backs. Many lay Dominicans and parishioners homeless. Need to set up emergency office location. Etc. etc. etc.

People will want to know how they can help. If people want to help the general population of New Orleans, they should send the money to the Red Cross. The Red Cross is much better equipped to put those funds to use. But we too need funds to begin to recover from this devastation and to assist our co-workers and parishioners as much as we can. Please do not miss an opportunity to let people know that we need this assistance. If they want to assist the friars and those we minister to ask them to send the money to our relief fund, and please let them know how grateful we are.

Here is the fund information:

Make checks out to:

Dominican Friars Hurricane Relief

c/o St. Albert Priory
3150 Vince Hagan Dr.
Irving, TX 75062-4736

Forgiveness isn't easy, especially when offenses against us have caused pain not only to ourselves, but to someone we love. A conversation recently with a woman who had a bitter divorce gave evidence of the hurts that accompany almost every divorce. The woman is an unskilled worker with a fourteen year old daughter to raise. She wonders how she'll pay her daughter's fees and expenses for this new school year. Her former husband has withheld child support, though he can afford it. The mother is a devout Christian and feels guilty for her anger and resentment toward her former spouse. I wonder how she will hear this parable today in church?

Sometimes when I read scriptures the sense is rather clear and I can take something with me, a message for reflection. Even if I don't understand an entire passage, I listen for a word, phrase, image or verse I can chew on and pray about till the next time I go to the bible or hear the scriptures proclaimed in church. For example, last week I was challenged not to let an offense against me fester. Instead, I heard Jesus say I should go to the offending brother or sister and talk over the offense with him/her. I don't have to be a bible scholar to get something from passages like that.

But then there's today's story! The passage starts simply enough with a question by Peter. His inquiry picks up where we left off last week with Jesus' description of the reconciliation process members of the community should pursue when an offense against them has been committed. By now, who among us doesn't know the centrality and importance of forgiveness in the Christian community? Lest we forget, we are soon reminded of it whenever we say the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Even if we weren't religious people, psychologists have told us of the importance of forgiveness, not only in our relationships with others, but for our own mental well being.

In today's gospel passage Peter puts a question about forgiveness to Jesus. Peter seems to think he has the right answer. But Jesus answers the question in a way that must have surprised Peter and, as if to back up his response, Jesus tells a

parable. But this parable isn't like one of those passages I mentioned above, easily accessible for reflection. It is a rough-sounding parable. On first hearing I feel edgy because God doesn't come off sounding like anyone I'd like to get close to or get to know. After ending the parable about the unforgiving debtor's being handed over to the torturers, "until he should pay back the whole debt," Jesus adds, "So shall my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother/sister from your heart." See what I mean? Sounds like quite a change from the loving compassionate God Jesus has been manifesting in his speech and actions. As a preacher I also suspect that closing line is going to reinforce the image of the punishing and demanding God some of us still carry around within us, even if it is deep down at an unconscious level. What's a preacher to do with all the baggage this parable is carrying?

As we approach this parable let's remember it is a Parable----not an Allegory. The parable is setting out for us something about what it is like to live under God's dominion. The king is not a figure for God; nor do the debtors represent us. Jesus presents a story in response to Peter's question. It is for us to consider. What is there in the world of this parable that reveals something to us of the workings of the kingdom of heaven? If we make God's behavior the same as the king's in the story, we will run into some tough issues: Is God really as vengeful as the powerful king? Will God stop being merciful if we are not forgiving? Is God's forgiveness conditional? Whatever happened to the all-embracing mercy of God that Jesus has been revealing in the gospel? Let's look more closely at the parable. First its setting or the occasion of Jesus' telling the parable.

Peter asks his question about the number of times we "must" forgive. Poor Peter! He probably thought he was finally getting the point of Jesus' teaching, since Jesus had just explained the process believers had to go through to be reconciled with offenders (Matt. 18: 15-20—last week's gospel immediately precedes today's). Peter probably thought he was being generous by suggesting forgiving a brother/sister seven times. That seems like a lot of forgiveness for a repeat offender. And in their belief, seven was a perfect number, it had a fullness. But even a "perfect number" has its limits; at a point one could say, "There, I have done what is required."

Jesus' response, "seventy-seven times," as if to say, "you must forgive on and on and on." He is telling the community that forgiveness is not counted or measured

out like items on a shopping list----a dozen eggs, a six-pack of beer, two pounds of potatoes. Forgiveness, Jesus is saying, has no limits. You can see why he would have to follow up this statement with a parable. Jesus needs to underline the prominence and quality forgiveness must have in his church.

I wonder is there is a part of the parable that has been cut out? After the initial debtor is forgiven the huge debt, why don't we hear about his relief, joy and celebration? Why isn't he jumping up and down like a person who has been let out of prison or won a 10 million dollar lottery (one commentator says that in the original language the "huge amount" the servant owed the king would be the wages of a day laborer for 150,000 years!)

The unforgiving servant couldn't possibly pay back what he owed to the powerful king. He says he needs time, but no matter how much time he would be given, or what he might have tried to do, he would never have been able to pay back even a fraction of what he owed. He was completely under the power of the king. But instead of "justice," he received mercy. Parables always seem to have an element of surprise, something no one using worldly logic would have predicted. The servant has entered an entirely new way of living; using the world's sense of justice, his debts should have ended his life and the life of his family. They were about to be sold. Instead, he and his family are set free from a debt they could never have paid. In the light of the great gift, the servant should have seen the rest of his life as living under the freedom he was given. He should have been aware that "all is gift."

But none of this sinks in; he somehow has blocked the gift from affecting his life. We have proof-positive that he is unchanged when he refuses to forgive his fellow servant, "who owed him a much smaller amount."

Sometimes as I work on a parable—rather, as a parable works on me— I try to paraphrase the major issues I am hearing. So far, this is what comes to me. The parable's main features: a person owes a debt he could never repay, even though he claims he will. The debt is forgiven, not because of anything the debtor said or did, but due to an entirely gratuitous gesture by the one owed the debt. The released debtor is unchanged by the gift he has received and immediately refuses to offer another debtor forgiveness for, in comparison to what the former owed, an insignificant amount. Since he was unaffected by the master's enormous

generosity, he is back to where he started, in debt with no way to pay it back. Now he must pay the consequences of his debt.

I hear the core gospel message restated in this parable. There is nothing we have done, or can do, to earn forgiveness. God gives it to us over and over again, “seventy-seven times.” First of all, we need to reflect on this truth. Our life with God is a gift, from beginning to end. We pause at today’s eucharist to let that truth sink into our bones. When we asked for forgiveness today, we received it. The eucharist is our act of thanksgiving for what we realize again we have received from the hands of a gracious God. A sign that we really believe we have been forgiven free of charge, is to give similar forgiveness to others, again and again.

I am thinking of that single mother whose husband refuses to pay child support. I would go after him with the force of the civil law until he paid up. But in the light of today’s gospel, I would pray for the power to forgive him so that I could get on with my life and set him free to do the same. After he has paid up!

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Barbara E. Reid, *PARABLES FOR PREACHERS: YEAR A* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2001. Paper, \$14.95 ISBN0-8146-2550-9).

A biblical scholar applies her rich scriptural background with her love of preaching to analyze the gospel parables as they appear in the Sunday and weekday lectionary for this liturgical year A. This is not a mere repetition of previous commentaries on the parables but a fresh and insightful approach. Especially useful are guidelines for interpreting the parables and an overview of Matthew’s gospel.

QUOTABLE

The preacher might highlight that the prayer we recite together most frequently incorporates the very same message as this parable. When, at the end of the Our Father, we pray, “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,” we are asking God to let the experience of being forgiven so transform our hearts that we may likewise forgive others. It would be a foolish person who would pray the other way around, asking God to forgive us only in the puny measure we are able to forgive others. What 18:35 as well as 6: 14-15 express is that the extent to which disciples learn to forgive in this life has ramifications for

eternal life.

—Reid, pages 140-1,

JUSTICE NOTES

SUPPORT FAIR HEARING FOR SUPREME COURT NOMINEE

BACKGROUND: On July 6, 2005, Spokane Bishop William S. Skylstad, president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), wrote a letter to President Bush concerning the U.S. Supreme Court vacancy. In his letter, Bishop Skylstad communicated to the President that the USCCB does not endorse or oppose specific nominees, stating “Our concern is for principles and policies rather than for personalities.”

Bishop Skylstad urged President Bush “to consider for the Court qualified jurists who, pre-eminently, support the protection of human life from conception to natural death, especially of those who are unborn, disabled, or terminally ill.” Bishop Skylstad also raised the issues of the rights of minorities, immigrants, and those in need, First Amendment protections for religious institutions, parental choice in education, and the restraint and abolition of the death penalty. The Senate should consider the nominee’s qualifications for the Supreme Court and not use a single issue like abortion as a litmus test.

Senate confirmation hearings for Judge John Roberts, the Supreme Court nominee, are expected to take place soon after Labor Day when the U.S. Senate returns from its current recess.

POSITION: All human beings deserve respect and protection from harm, especially those who are most defenseless. The rights of all human persons must be protected and the common good preserved.

ACTION: Please urge [Your state senators], through the Capitol switchboard at 202-224-3121, to support a fair and impartial hearing for Supreme Court nominee Judge John Roberts and reject the application of any single issue litmus test.

—“The Catholic Advocate,” A bulletin of the Washington State Catholic Conference (WSCC)

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:.....

George C Buckner #0054499 (On death row since 10/8/93)

James C. Buckner #0441726 (11/3/93)

Levon J. Jones #0217091 (11/20/93)

---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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