

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 25<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY (A)

Isaiah 55: 6-9 Psalm 145 Philippians 1: 20c-24, 27a Matthew 20: 1-16

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

I bet most of us really don't like today's parable and if someone gave us chance to eliminate 2 or 3 stories from the bible, this would rank near the top of the list, along with the Mary and Martha story. Poor Martha, a hard worker who doesn't seem to get the credit she deserves. We may bristle when we hear scriptures that seem to go against the solid work ethic most of us learned and have practiced since we were children: you get the pay you worked for—fair's fair. We don't expect handouts and we want things “just.” Give us what we deserve and have worked hard for---that's all we ask.

So, we identify with the all-day laborers in today's parable and we think they got a raw deal and that the story isn't just. Why do they even keep this story in the bible? Aren't bible stories supposed to be about fairness and justice—getting what we have worked hard for and justly deserve?

I have had work experiences like the one described in today's story; when you stand around and wait to get hired. It's a process called “shaping up,”—prospective laborers hang around and wait to get picked for work. When I was in college on major holiday evenings, I used to go with a friend to the basement of the New York Times. There a foreman hired extra help to supplement the regulars who were with their families for the holiday feast. We would get there at 7pm and wait in a large basement room. Each hour the foreman would come up from the printing presses down below and hire helpers to take the papers off the presses and stack them on wooden pallets for shipping. The work was arduous, dirty and noisy and it lasted till the early hours of the morning. It was back breaking and boring—but it paid well and we needed the money for college.

So, we would stand around waiting for the hourly appearances of the foreman, hoping to get lucky and be picked. We weren't-- not right away. We noticed the biggest guys were picked first and those whom the foreman knew by first name. I was a lanky 19-year-old with no contacts, no connections to speak a good word for me. Fat chance of getting hired early! As each hour went by we figured we had

lost another hour's pay and sleep. Eventually, towards midnight, we might get hired, if they were desperate for workers that night. The system seemed to work against us, but we accepted it since when we did get work, the pay was good. When we went to collect our pay at the end of the night, no one offered us more than we deserved, no one gave us less. If they did, we would have cried "foul." After all, from an early age, we had learned about "fair and square." At nineteen we already had our sense of justice and learned to play according to the rules.

Why should the bible be any different? Why shouldn't the rules we learned in life about fairness apply to the bible—of all places! Shouldn't these bible stories be stellar examples of what is fair and square? So, since today's gospel passage doesn't seem to measure up to our usual expectations, why not rip it out of the bible? Maybe it got in there by mistake. But of course it didn't. So, let's look more closely at it, bringing to the story our hard-worker's sense of indignation.

Who are these workers featured in the story anyway? They are day laborers, subsistence workers. They aren't college students on the way to a career, trying to get some money for the next tuition bill. In Jesus' time over 90% of people lived in dire poverty, going from hand to mouth each day. There were no retirement benefits; no unemployment insurance; no disability payments. When they worked one day, they got one day's pay-- that's all. One day's pay meant another day when the family could eat. Those who worked fewer hours, the ones hired later, would have been the less-fit workers; the feeble, old, injured, women, widows, the very young, etc. Imagine a parent going home to face the kids and to tell them there wouldn't be enough food tomorrow. You shrug your shoulders; you feel like a failure to you family. Think about it. All my "fair and square" talk---fair pay for work done---would have left those people hired later in the day, with less than a day's pay. How would they feed their children? Where would they get the "daily bread" they needed and prayed for?

While my sense of "justice" would have left people hungry; the owner leaves no one out. What threw this parable off for us; why didn't it work out as we would have expected? What factor made it go askew and violate our sense of justice? It's that word the owner threw into the negotiations----"generous." "Are you envious because I am generous?" That's the word that breaks our strict codes, our being able to predict how things will turn out. "Generous"—the word that flows over the edges of the box we would put God in; how we think God should act. I

have my own script for how God should speak and act. If God would follow it, God would be predictable, have a fixed way of behaving.

But God follows no script; is not bound by my rules about what is right. God seems to relish working outside of social norms and sometimes even outside of church rules. How do you deal with a God who turns out to be different; who does the unexpected and surprises both friend and foe? Whose side is God on anyway?

But in the light of today's parable, when I think things over, I'll leave my side and go over to the side where God is. Standing before God, I will opt for generosity. When I fail to measure up to being the person I wanted to be or others wanted me to be, I'll take God's generous settling of accounts. In the light of this parable, all things considered, I'll take a generous judgment from God. The world measures people's worth by their looks, grades in school, athletic prowess, etc. How do I know this? Because when I am waiting with groceries at the supermarket check-out counter, I look down at those magazine covers and I notice what kinds of people are on the covers. No one is old, or dressed poorly, is heavy (you can't be too thin in our world, or too rich), or has pimples! I feel like I must live on another planet from the ones those cover people live on.

When I go before God, being less than perfect in my works, looks or spirit--- I'll take "generous" any day. Relying on generous, I will hear a judgment passed on me: that I am valuable and worth the full reward for whatever work I have done. When I know I have done wrong and have no excuse for my behavior and when I expect the punishment I deserve—I'll take forgiveness and a "generous" judgement. I'll be grateful, as I am today at eucharist, for the chance to start all over again—each time I ask for it.

But if that's really what I get from God—"generous"—then I need to look at the standards I apply to others. Like the kids at school: not judging them by their looks, or if they are on the varsity team, or have the latest jeans and sneakers. I will need to look at the standards I apply to others and treat all people graciously; whether or not they live in my part of town; have my level of income, education, travel experiences and status on the corporate ladder. I must be sure not to hold back a gracious welcome to the "late-comers" to my parish community or to this country. If I want to stay under the generous judgment I already have received

from God, then I had better not walk away judging others by another standard than the one used to judge me—the generous one!

### ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Timothy Radcliffe, OP, *I CALL YOU FRIENDS*. London: Continuum, 2001. ISBN 0-8264-5188-8, paper.

The first part of this book is biography in conversational form which describes Radcliffe's privileged youth in England and then his call to the simple life of a Dominican friar. The second part consists of theological essays, reflections on believing and the practice of faith in our times. His writing style is simple and his reflections profound. A good book for the preacher interested in hearing a theologian and preacher reflect on the world and cultures in which we preach.

### QUOTABLE

Cardinal Newman said there were three authorities in the Church: the authority of tradition, the authority of reason and the authority of experience, which he placed respectively in the hierarchy, the university and the body of the faithful. He added that if one of these three became too dominant, the right exercise of authority in the Church risked being compromised. Each needs to be strong; for example, the theological faculties have their authority. Charismatic movements, for example, easily tend to give too much authority to experience. There have been moments when reason appeared to be absolutized, as in some countries in eighteenth-century Europe. Today, I think that some groups within the Church give too exclusive a stress to tradition, to the detriment of reason and experience.

—Timothy Radcliffe, OP, page 75.

### JUSTICE NOTES

(These weekly quotes may be helpful in your preaching or may also be added to your weekly parish bulletin as a way of informing your faith community on some social issues.)

### 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 E. Goode #0140596 (On death row since 11/20/93 )

Martin A. Richardson #0343075 (11/22/93)

Randy L. Atkins #0012311 (12/8/93)

---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](mailto:Jboll@opsouth.org) or [jboll@preacherexchange.org](mailto: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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