

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 33rd SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A) Proverbs
31: 10-13, 19-20, 30-31 Psalm 128 I Thess 5: 1-6 Matthew 25: 14-30
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

I wonder what makes all those poker competitions on television so popular? There's talk of having a special cable channel just for poker; I may be out of touch here, perhaps there is one already. A week ago I was sitting next to a man on a plane and for two hours he played a video game on his computer based on one of those tv poker contests. Once he even gave an audible “Yeah” when he won. (I admit to taking an occasional peak, and once I was tempted to tell him to draw three cards instead of two.) There seems to be a huge audience for these gambling games and shows. What attracts people to them?

I know I was fascinated one night when I came upon one poker show and I stayed tuned for a while because one man bet another \$30,000 on the draw of a card. I would have been a nervous wreck; but he didn't flinch. I guess that's where they get the expression “poker face.” What risks that man was taking! Now I don't want to hold up gambling or gamblers as models for our behavior, too many people waste limited resources gambling and there are many gambling addicts whose lives have been ruined at a card table or roulette wheel. But in today's parable about the three servants Jesus does use a parallel example from the risky world of investing and business to make a point about something else entirely—how we are to use the faith he has left us.

The servants were left an enormous amount of money; one talent was equal to what a poor person might earn in 15 years of work. They were entrusted with the master's possessions and were expected to conduct business and make a profit until the master returned. Now this is not a parable about simple living, frugality, charity, renouncing possessions, etc. Jesus has said plenty about those things elsewhere. In this parable he uses examples from the world of money and business dealings to encourage his disciples to be willing to take risks in his name. These days he might have drawn his example from those televised poker games to make a similar point; to point to the way we disciples are to go about conducting our “business” in his absence.

The parable reminds us that the faith we treasure is not frail or easily contaminated by taking it out into the market place and investing it. Instead, Christ has given us a gift that can withstand the tests the world throws at it. We are encouraged by this parable to take risks and take our faith with us into the affairs of daily life: work, school, shopping, social events and into the public forum where we must witness to what we believe.

You can tell from the scripture readings these past weeks that the liturgical year is coming to a close. There has been a strong emphasis on being prepared for the Lord's return. That return is delayed and there is a danger that we disciples will lose our edge, grow lackadaisical in our service. The parables we have been hearing prior to today call us to be prepared by doing the work Christ has given us to do. Today's parable doesn't stress preparedness as much as it spells out how we should go about our assigned work during our long wait for Christ's return; we are to engage the world with confidence and even take risks when necessary.

What is striking is the trust the master had in his servants. He didn't leave them a long list of detailed orders spelling out when, where, how and what they were to do. We disciples have broad latitude in our service; there is not one perfect or superior form of discipleship and ministry. There is no hierarchy of more and less-valued works in God's reign. Our Master trusts us in whatever way we invest ourselves in his name. The master in the parable knew that in the world of business, there would be risks; yet he expected the servants to take those risks with his money. And it was a lot of money! A talent was equal to six thousand days' pay. Perhaps he knew the third servant wasn't as capable as the other two, nevertheless, even the one talent he gave him was an enormous amount of money. But since that servant acted out of fear and buried the money, he is cast out of the household; will not enjoy the master's homecoming; will not be entrusted with greater responsibilities. Outside there is wailing and grinding of teeth. The loss of everything comes by not taking risks.

We talk about "waiting for the Lord's return," and this can sound like lying low, passively waiting and trying to stay out of trouble. We have to admit that the church doesn't always challenge us to take the kind of risk described in the parable. But the mere fact that we have survived for 2,000 years proves nothing, it is not a measure of success. Nor would failure of a project be as bad as we might think, if we had taken a risk in Jesus' name. This is not a timid parable and leaves

no room for inactivity and disengagement from the world that we religious people have sometimes described as “full of temptations.” It may be so, but the parable encourages us to get involved and put our faith into practice. A few might be called to live cloistered lives, but most Christians are urged to be industrious in the places where the world carries out its “business” and to use the treasures we have been given to effect change that will help make the reign of God more a reality in our lives. The faith we have is not fragile, for it is not made by human hands. Rather, it is given us by God; it is a rich and an effective treasure and need not be handled with kid gloves. If we don’t take risks with it, how can we say we have faith?

I am reflecting on this parable with a newspaper I just read next to me. Last night Rosa Parks died. She was called “the Mother of the Civil Rights Movement” in this country. In the ‘50’s she had been active in the local Montgomery, Alabama chapter of the NAACP (The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). When asked to relinquish her bus seat to a white man, she refused. She was tired, she said, of being harassed and humiliated by segregation. Her resistance sparked a boycott by African Americans of the Montgomery buses for 381 days that ended with the November 13th, 1956 Supreme Court decision (*Browder vs. Gayle*) that outlawed segregation on the city buses. Her resistance on the bus and subsequent arrest transformed a 26-year-old preacher named Martin Luther King, Jr. into a national civil rights leader. (Before there was a Martin Luther King, Jr. there was a Rosa Parks?)

Rosa Parks’ defiance seems now like a simple gesture of protest. Many of us have participated in one form of public protest or another—for the most part, safe ones. But it was a risky and reckless move in 1950’s Alabama. She risked legal sanctions and even physical harm. Her personality was anything but flamboyant; she was a private person. I have a photograph that shows the elderly Rosa Parks standing in the pew of a church, her hands resting on the back of the pew in front of her. I don’t know this for sure, but the picture suggests her faith gave her the support she needed. Indeed, the civil rights movement was nurtured, supported and inspired by the African-American churches in the South.

So, how many talents did Rosa Parks have? She’s an icon to most of us, but in her modesty she might have said, “One.” Nevertheless, with whatever she was given, she took a risk and invested it. And all of us, black, red, brown, yellow and white

have reaped the profits from her investment of herself.

QUOTABLE

“I renew the appeal...for a consensus to end the death penalty, which is both cruel and unnecessary.” Pope John Paul II on his historic 1999 trip to St. Louis, Missouri

We oppose capital punishment not just for what it does to those guilty of horrible crimes but for what it does to all of us as a society. Increasing reliance on the death penalty diminishes all of us and is a sign of growing disrespect for human life. We cannot overcome crime by simply executing criminals, nor can we restore the lives of the innocent by ending the lives of those convicted of their murders. The death penalty offers the tragic illusion that we can defend life by taking life.

U.S. Catholic Conference, Administrative Board, 1999. Quoted in, “Sentenced to Die, Still Children of God,” A pamphlet published by Pax Christi.

[Www.paxchristiusa.org](http://www.paxchristiusa.org)

JUSTICE NOTES

FACTS ABOUT THE DEATH PENALTY

- Approximately 3,500 inmates are on death row in 38 state, federal and military prisons. The largest number, over 600, is in California.
- Since 1973, there have been more than 115 exonerations of death row inmates.
- Recent Supreme Court decisions have limited the use of the death penalty by declaring it unconstitutional to execute persons with mental retardation and those who committed crimes as juveniles (under the age of 18). The court has also ruled that defendants are entitled to have a jury decide whether to impose the death penalty.
- Twelve states do not allow the use of the death penalty. Five additional states have not executed anyone since its reinstatement in 1976. Other states are actively considering the abolition of the death penalty including New Mexico and Connecticut.

----from Publication No. 5-723, “Catholic Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty,” Washington, DC, USCCB Publishing, ISBN 1-57455-723-8. For additional information: www.ccdep.org

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:.....

Jerry W. Connor #0085045 (On death row since 4/30/91)

Charles Walker #0420511 (2/7/95)

Isaac J. Stroud #0478925 (2/9/92)

----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,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA

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