

FIRST IMPRESSIONS PENTECOST (A)

Acts 2: 1-11 Psalm 104 I Cor 12: 3b--7, 12-13 John 20: 19-23

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

In the southern United States we have an expression, “God has no grandchildren.” Which I take to mean that faith is not a pre-packaged heirloom that is merely handed on from one generation to the next: from parents to their children, and then from children to grandchildren. Of course, one generation does its best to educate and train its children in faith and religious practices. We are not merely 2,000-year descendents of the first Christian generation, the “pure church,” which existed at the time of Christ and first received the Holy Spirit. Instead, each new generation are first-generation Christians, born of the Holy Spirit and sent to proclaim the gospel for a new age. Today reminds us of that. “If only we had been there,” is not our lament. We are there—because in Baptism we received the same, fresh, youthful Holy Spirit the disciples assembled together received. God has no grandchildren. We are God’s children, born of God’s Spirit.

Something amazing happened to the disciples on that “first day of the week.” When John tells us the day it happened, he is saying more than giving us a calendar reference. From the beginning of his gospel, which opens with the telltale line, “In the beginning...,” John has had a “Genesis tone” to his narrative. He has been showing that, through the Word made flesh, the world is being re-created. Fallen humanity has been given a fresh start because God is once again busy about creation, making humanity in God’s image and likeness. Genesis described God’s Word as the creative force that accomplishes God’s intent. John’s gospel begins with the Prologue’s asserting the pre-existence of the Word and that this agent of creation entered time, is the source of new life and conquers the darkness of sin.

Besides their fear of the authorities, the disciples were burdened by their abandonment of Jesus. Immediately before today’s passage Mary Magdalen, having seen the risen Christ in the garden, just told the disciples, “I have seen the Lord” (v. 18). So, added to their fear of outside forces, they must have also been confused and anxious about what Mary had reported. If Christ were alive and returned to their group, what would he say to them? Would he accuse them of their betrayals and hold them as failures? And who among us would not also feel their anxieties if we were to meet the risen Christ? Therefore Jesus’ first words to the

disciples are important, "Peace be with you." What a relief that must have been for them!

And for us too. The risen Christ comes to us and says, "Peace to you." The past, with all its regrets and missteps has been forgiven. We are set at peace with God and one another. We are recreated, new creatures, through the Word of God. Where once there was sin, compromise, half-hearted discipleship, cowardice and blindness, now there is forgiveness and a chance to begin again on this "first day of the week."

When Jesus washed his disciples' feet (13: 1 ff.), he did it in a sequence. First, he washed their feet, making them clean and setting an example for them. Then, he told them to go and wash the feet of others. Today the Risen Christ follows a similar sequence. First he establishes peace and reconciliation with his disciples, "Peace be with you." Then, he tells them, in effect, to follow his example and do the same: go forth and forgive.

But they are mere mortals, like us. So, if they are to be able to forgive they and we, are going to need a transforming Spirit. We need to be recreated. And that is what Jesus does, when he breathes his Spirit upon the disciples. "God has no grandchildren"—so, our generation also receives the Spirit of the One who forgives, so that we too can practice forgiveness and reconciliation in our conflicted and divided world.

We celebrate Pentecost today as we view the feast through John's eyes. In his gospel the Spirit is given on the day of the resurrection. It is as if he is saying that the risen Christ is acting fast. He is no sooner raised from the dead than he goes to his disciples to give them the Spirit they will need to do his most important work. Forgiveness is at the top of Jesus' list. He reconciles his disciples and gives them what they will need to practice forgiveness in the world.

Their work will not be easy. Jesus died for doing what he did. He shows them his hands and his side, they are pierced, wounds on the body of the world's Peacemaker. Seeing the risen Christ is a cause for the disciples' rejoicing. So is receiving his Spirit. But besides the joy the Spirit gives, there is also the reminder that to be a peaceable people and to practice forgiveness in the world, means we must also keep our eyes fixed on Jesus' wounds. Peacemaking and the work of reconciliation, on large and small scale, will cost the disciples. Maybe that is why

Jesus says a second time, "Peace be with you.," before he tells them he is sending them as missionaries of forgiveness into the world. God has sent the Son to reconcile the world. Now the Son gives us the Spirit to continue his mission.

In Genesis God breathed into the dust of the earth to create human beings. Now the breath is given us again and we receive new life and a new beginning. How can our words and actions extend that new life and new beginning to others? I once heard God described as "the God of the second chance." What we hear in today's gospel is that we are given a second chance. And we need it! A third, fourth and fifth chance as well. But who's counting?

We can mirror our "second-chance God" by not giving up on people labeled as "hopeless." A woman I know directs a housing program for the poor. About ten years ago her agency placed a homeless man into a tiny apartment. He had bipolar disease so they got him medications and supervision to make sure he took his pills. He didn't always and a few times he was arrested for his public behavior. But still, the agency didn't give up on him. My friend told me, "I just got a call from him. He had gotten an on-line degree in computer programming. He just loves computers and he has been hired by a big company." Jesus didn't give up on his disciples despite their many failures. Now that we have been given his Spirit we too mirror our "second-chance God" to others.

There will be people who refuse the offer of forgiveness and reconciliation. There is plenty of evidence of that in our world today. In John's gospel Jesus has said that how people relate to him matters. If they receive him and the forgiveness he offers, they are forgiven. If they reject him, they pass judgment on themselves by turning away from the forgiveness he offers them. The same will happen for Jesus' Spirit-filled disciples. We will speak words of forgiveness and work for reconciliation---but not all will accept us. They will choose instead to "retain," or not receive forgiveness. The just-forgiven disciples are told by Christ to preach forgiveness. In each generation we must discern how best to do that, even though our message is rejected and people choose to stay in their darkness.

Jesus' Spirit urges us to be instruments of forgiveness and reconciliation. That requires courage, especially because forgiveness is risky. Forgiveness, in the midst of conflictual situations, can leave us vulnerable---a very uncomfortable place to be. We could always choose to stay safe behind locked doors. But then that is not what Jesus has in mind for us today as he breathes his Spirit upon us, despite our locked

doors.

ONE GOOD PUBLICATION FOR THE PREACHER

“HOLY SPIRIT,” THE LIVING PULPIT, January-March 1996, Volume 5, No. 1.

This excellent quarterly focuses on one theme each edition and then provides essays, quotes, biblical commentary, poetry and book reviews to help the preacher study the theme from various perspectives. Previous themes include, Advent, Jesus, Forgiveness, Prayer, Grace, Suffering, Sabbath, etc. Back issues are available.

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QUOTABLE

Everyday Mysticism. ...the experience of the Spirit I talk of here is also to be found in a mysticism of everyday life outside a verbalized and institutionalized Christianity, and therefore may be discovered by Christian in their lives when the encounter their non-Christian brothers and sisters, or in their study of religious history, Christians need not be shocked or astonished at such a revelation. It should serve only to show that their God, the God of Jesus Christ, wants all men and women to be saved, and offers God's grace as liberation to all human beings, offering it as liberation into incomprehensible mystery. The grace of Christ takes effect in a mysterious way...and...allows people to share in the paschal mystery of Jesus, even where people who are loyal to their conscience have not yet been reached in any convincing way by the explicit message of Christianity and have not been molded by the Christian sacraments.

—Karl Rahner, quoted in LIVING PULPIT, Volume 5, No.1

BLESSING PRAYER FOR MOTHER'S DAY

God of Love,

listen to this prayer.

God of Holy People,

of Sarah, Ruth and Rebekah;

God of holy Elizabeth, mother of John, of Holy Mary, Mother of Jesus,

bend down Your ear to this request and bless the mother of our family.

Bless her with the strength of Your spirit, she who has taught her children how to stand and how to walk.

Bless her with the melody of Your love,
she who has shared how to speak, how to sing and how to pray to You.
Bless her with a place at Your eternal dinner table, she who has fed and nurtured
the life that was formed within her
while still helpless but embraced in her love.
Bless her today,
now, in this lifetime,
with good things, with health
Bless her with joy, love, laughter and pride in her children
and surround her with many good friends.
May she who carried life in her womb
be carried one day to Your divine embrace: there, for all eternity,
to rejoice with her family and friends.
This blessing and all graces, we pray,
descend upon the mother of our family: in the name of the Father,
and of the Son
and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen

-----Source unknown (Book of Blessings?)

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

“Each one heard them speaking in his own language, and they were astounded.”

Act 2:6-7

Every year we hear on Pentecost that the power of God's Spirit was experienced in the understanding of each other despite speaking in different languages.

Then as now, "Our common faith in Jesus Christ is a faith that transcends borders and bids us to overcome all forms of discrimination and violence so that we may build relationships that are just and loving." (*Strangers No Longer, A Pastoral Letter From the Catholic Bishops of Mexico and the United States*)

<http://www.usccb.org/mrs/stranger.shtml>

Prayer ***is one of our common languages***. It is understood by God in whatever language we speak and by each other in the signs of love which prayer inspires.

Following is a prayer written by Cardinal McCarrick, former Archbishop of Washington DC. Please consider praying it daily as we search for ways as a church and a nation to welcome those who hope to make a better life among us, and who speak, in the words of today's readings, "many languages".

I pray for those who remain in the shadows of our society, for those who are unable to defend their rights or give their full talents to their communities without fear.

I pray for those who feel compelled to risk their lives in crossing the vast desert that soon their suffering may end.

I pray for our elected officials that they may have wisdom and courage - the wisdom that they may understand the need for change and the courage that they might accomplish it.

May the Lord bless our road ahead. May we walk it always in a civil and peaceful way so that our voices may be heard by all Americans, and that understanding and education about the rights of immigrants can bear fruit in our land.

May the Lord, Whose Resurrection from the dead gives life and hope to all humanity, bring the grace of success to our efforts, and may His Blessed Mother, the Virgin of Guadalupe, walk with us always on the way.

Study the web site of our US Catholic Bishops www.justiceforimmigrants.org. It is filled with current information on legislation and the position of our US Catholic Bishops on the subject of immigration.

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

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." *If the inmate responds, you might consider becoming pen pals.*

Please write to:.....

Stacey A. Tyler #0414853 (On death row since 11/14/95)

Davy G. Stephens #0388922 (12/20/95)

Russell Tucker #0413011 (2/21/96)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. Two new CDs Available: **"FIRST IMPRESSIONS PREACHING REFLECTIONS"** **"Liturgical year A,"** which begins in Advent and contains **three** reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts for the year. It also has book reviews and additional essays related to preaching.

"Liturgical years, A, B and C," reflections on the three-year cycle.

If you are a preacher, lead a Lectionary-based scripture group, or are a member of a liturgical team, these CDs will be helpful in your preparation process. Individual worshipers report they also use these reflections as they prepare for Sunday liturgy.

You can order the CDs by going to our webpage: www.preacherexchange.com and clicking on the "First Impressions" CDs link on the left.

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 webpage: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

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

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