

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER (B)

Acts 9: 26-31 Psalm 22 I John 3: 18-24 John 15: 1-8

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The emphasis in the gospel passage is more on Jesus as the “true vine” than on God as the gardener. In the Hebrew scriptures, God as gardener was a popular image and so it would not be news to the disciples when Jesus described God in this way. The images of the vineyard or vine were also familiar to them, for these were applied to Israel. Here Jesus is identifying himself with the vine and emphasizing that the life he has for us is coming from God. But he is not referring to some future time, when we will have intimate life with him. Rather, he uses the present tense to describe what is already true for his disciples; we already are in union with him and now we must do our best to remain in that union.

With Jesus as the vine, we don’t have to be born into some particular race, nationality or class of people to belong and be part of him. Anyone can belong to Jesus’ community and receive, through this vine, the life he gives us from God. Forget what the person looks like; how expensive their clothes are; or where they were born. If they are grafted to the true vine their lives will show it, that’s all the proof of identity they will need. St. Paul, in today’s second reading, sums up what faithful membership in this community means: “We should believe in the name of God’s son, Jesus Christ and love one another just as he commanded us.” We don’t wear special membership pins or badges in this new community. The sign that shows we belong and remain in the true vine, is that we love one another. Our love isn’t just for “our own kind”; we love those who are not even members. This love flows out to others from the community that is connected to Jesus, especially to the unloved and the excluded, because those were the ones Jesus particularly loved. Since we now have the vine’s life flowing in us, we will love as he loved.

John does not say that Jesus is the root or the stump of the vine. If that were the case then, those branches closest to the stump/root would be closest to the source of life. They would have a privileged place, could claim this priority and even try to regulate the flow of the divine life to the other branches. Those closest would hold the ranking of “first class disciples,” then there would be “second class,” “third class,” etc. ranked disciples. At the end there would be the lowest and least dignified class. Jesus doesn’t call himself the root or the stump instead, the image he uses of himself is the “true vine.” We, in turn, are the “branches” who are to

bear “much fruit.” Because we are connected to the vine, such fruitfulness is now possible and indeed, the responsibility of all connected to the vine. No one is denied the source of divine life; nor are any exempted from bearing “much fruit”.

In John’s gospel, Jesus has said that he is the source of living water and is the bread that has come from heaven to give life. Now, in the intimate setting of the Last Supper, he tells his disciples that he is the vine. The Anchor Bible commentary points out that drinking water and eating bread were symbols for believing in Jesus. Since this was a discourse at the Supper, those early worshipers, hearing these words about the life-giving vine, could not help but think of the eucharistic cup, “fruit of the vine.” In the earliest eucharistic liturgies, the following was said over the cup: “We thank you, Our Father, for the holy vine of David your servant, which you revealed to us through Jesus your servant.” The only other passage where “bearing fruit” is mentioned in this gospel is in 12:4, which speaks of the seed needing to die to bear fruit. In today’s passage, Jesus speaks of those who remain in him and he in them bearing much fruit. But we know from the gospel that bearing much fruit comes only through death. To stay attached and fruitful we must live committed lives. Love is the first fruit we are to bear; and Jesus has shown that love requires sacrifice and even death. At this eucharist we celebrate the death and resurrection of Christ. The vine’s life flows into the branches enabling us to live his dying and rising from the dead in our daily lives. Merely being members of the community of Jesus’ followers is not enough. Our lives must reflect the life of the vine to which we belong and from which we continually receive the will and power to live the sacrificial love Jesus has shown us.

We hear in the Acts reading today that the disciples were reluctant to accept Paul. After all, what they knew of him was that he had persecuted the church. Barnabas comes to Paul’s defense and protests to the disciples that Paul had seen the Lord and had “spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus.” Paul proceeds to do the same things in Jerusalem as he did elsewhere, he “spoke out boldly in the name of Jesus.” He was living as one attached to the true vine. His life was transformed, and he was “bearing much fruit.” Such boldness would eventually cost him his life as it did for Jesus. You can tell Paul had the same life flowing in him that Jesus did; he was attached to the vine and, as Jesus predicted of such a disciple, Paul bore much fruit.

We are always in the need of further pruning. We will need to remain attached to

the vine and allow that pruning to take place. In the process, we will have to die to what prevents the life of Jesus to flow freely through us. What will be pruned away in this process?--- prejudices, grudges, the unwillingness to forgive others, excesses and immoderate living and selfishness. Also needing pruning are the contentious arguments we get into over dogma, sects and ecclesiastical differences. There is no race, class or even church of people that can claim prerogative over Jesus, for his life flows into many diverse people and in very different ways.

The resurrection unleashed a life force into the world, and it spreads like a vine, gently, often imperceptibly. But the vine's life is insistent. It does not make an explosive sound when it arrives, like laser-guided missiles. When the sword was used to forcibly spread the reign of God, the consequential suffering mocked the One whose name was being promulgated. The cross emblazoned on a shield, a conquering flag or a war plane mocks the gentle true vine. Those are signs of dead branches that need pruning. Paul had waged persecution against, what he saw to be, the heretical Christian movement. Note in the first reading, he is called Saul--- his old name, the name that caused early Christians to quake in fear. Using his former name is a subtle reminder by Luke that the very one who wanted to do away with the early church is now ready to spread word of it. He will spread this word not by force, but by his words and deeds of love in Jesus' name. He met the Christ on the road to Damascus and now he is living a new life and direction, thanks both to that encounter and his staying connected to the true vine.

The food and drink for life is prepared for us today at our table. Come let us eat, let us drink so that the bread from heaven and the cup of the vine will strengthen our determination to remain in the true vine.

QUOTABLE - There is an old Latin saying: "nemo dat quod non habet," no one gives what he [she] does not have." A homily is a creative act. It asks that the preacher be not only a theologian and student of the Scriptures, but an artist, that is, a person with imagination and vision. Most men and women who ascend the ambo (pulpit) have studied the Bible. Most have spent years studying other serious theology, and their self-perception has been formed by these experiences. In too many cases, though, too little attention has been paid to their role as speakers who can employ language with zest and power. Failing divine intervention, a dull, tedious person, one whose interests are limited and unremarkable, will probably deliver a bland homily.

----Willard f. Jabusch, in *Commonweal*, March 28, 2003, page 31.

JUSTICE NOTES

Leadership Conference of Women Religious, Region I, including Sisters Jo-Ann Iannotti and Cecilia Crittenden, representatives of the Dominican Sisters of Hope, sent the following letter to newspapers in the New England area:
April 9, 2003

To the Editor

We, the 96 members of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in New England assembled these days at Mont Marie in Holyoke. On the brink of the Week that we Christians call Holy, we long for a holy peace for the people of Iraq and for all who have worked for justice on their behalf.

As women religious who have already taken a public stand for peace in Iraq, we now turn our attention to our hopes for the post-war reconstruction of this country. Aware that our government is already making such plans and that the consequences will affect not only Iraq, but also the entire world for generations to come, we advocate a reverent, humanitarian, non-military, international response coordinated by the United Nation.

We firmly believe that the leadership of the United Nations in Iraq would most effectively coordinate relief work, guarantee the engagement of other countries in decision making, garner the financial support needed to rebuild the country, facilitate right relationships between and among nations and religions, and ultimately create the optimal environment for securing a just and lasting peace in the Middle East and in our world.

Sincerely,
Maureen Broughan, SSJ Chairperson, Region I

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."
Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- Michael L. Fullword #0138201 (On death row since 8/19/94)
- Phillip Wilkinson #0438643 (9/15/94)
- Malcolm Eddie #0143501 (9/29/94)
- Edward Hartman #0172549 (10/20/94)

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

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

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Thank you. -

"Blessings on your preaching" - Jude Siciliano, OP - FrJude@JudeOP.org