

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:

PRENOTE:

We have just posted an essay by Brenda Walsh, OP entitled, “Reaching for the Common Good,” on our webpage. Go to www.PreacherExchange.com and click on “Justice Preaching.”

My grandparents were landowners. You have to understand that in Brooklyn, to be called a “landowner” was stretching the term a bit. In truth, they had a backyard. In the center of the yard was a cement slab “patio” and around it grandpa grew vegetables and fruits. He had 3 fruit trees – two fig and one peach. The fig trees were better suited to a more Mediterranean climate and so, to protect them through the harsh northeastern winters, he would tie up the branches close to the tree trunks and wrap the tightly bound fig trees in black tar paper, with the hope that the black would absorb at least some heat from the winter sun. Through the winters we could see those two fig trees in the backyard. They looked like thick wrapped carpets, surrounded by the barren, sometimes snow-covered garden, waiting out the winters.

But after an especially frigid winter one of the fig trees almost died. Grandpa decided he would prefer two peach and only one fig tree. “Less wrapping and unwrapping,” he said. So, he cut the fig tree down to its trunk, took a branch from the peach tree and grafted it to the fig tree’s trunk. He “bandaged” the spot where the two were joined and told us we had to wait to see if the graft took. If it didn’t, the peach branch would show the signs of a failed graft – it would die. If the graft did work, we kids wondered, would we get figs or peaches from the tree? The graft did work and the next summer we saw the first fruits from the grafted tree – peaches. The trunk provided the life, and the grafted branch kept its individuality and produced delicious peaches. But without the life from the root stock, the branch would have died, and we would be without grandma’s peach jam and cobbles. If, in the grafting process, there was any “pain” to the two trees, it was transitory and was meant for a fruit-yielding purpose.

We are like that branch attached to the root stock. Using similar agricultural

image, the vine, Jesus says we have to remain with him if we are to live and bear fruit. Through Baptism we have been “grafted” to Jesus; from him we draw our life. A peach tree branch yielded a peach tree. If my grandfather had used a plum branch, guess what kind of tree he would have gotten when he grafted it to the stock. My grandmother would have made plum, instead of peach, jam from the fruit. We are grafted to Jesus, the true vine and still, we keep our individuality and unique gifts for: music, storytelling, cooking, writing, organizing, nurturing, convincing, etc.

We are each different, but we are all drawing life from Christ as we live our Christian vocations in the world. No two of us are identical Christian twins; we are all unique. But the source of our life, Jesus tells us, is the same, “Remain in me, as I remain in you....” If one of us kids had pulled the grafted branch from its root base, besides being recipients of my grandfather’s ire, we would have been left holding a mere and useless stick, with no future peach pies or cobbles for us. Each of us, joined to Christ, can yield much fruit, not only for ourselves, but for those who look to us for help, encouragement and forgiveness.

Each time we gather here for worship we express our desire to stay united to Christ and to one another. We do that in our liturgical celebration by hearing the Word, when it is proclaimed, in silent listening; responding with prayers stirred up by what we have heard and then, as a community, by receiving the Eucharist. We do similarly at other sacramental celebrations.

As we watched my grandfather at work we knew he had good intentions, and all of us would be the recipients of his labor and our waiting. Still, the cutting part looked painful to the two trees. Is there pain for us too when we are pruned by God? What kind of pain? Doesn’t a kind of cutting or pruning take place here at our Eucharist when we hear the Word proclaimed in our assemblies? Jesus says we are “pruned because of the word that I spoke to you.” God’s Word constantly speaks to us and hearing that Word is a way for us to “remain on the vine.” We are listeners who need to keep our ears tuned to that Word because it reminds us of God’s on-going love and readiness to forgive.

If God has any “pruning” to do so that we can become more fruitful disciples of Jesus, it can happen when we are attentive to the Word. What we hear may enable us to realize how often we have missed or ignored God’s outreach to us. It is something like the pain and embarrassment we feel when a friend has tried to do

something nice for us and we missed the kindness, took it for granted or misinterpreted it. Such moments can be very painful indeed and can remind us not to let it happen again, lest we lose or damage our friendship. That's similar to the "pruning" God is constantly doing through the Word. Hearing that Word we can recognize and respond with more awareness to God's loving gestures towards us. We gather each week to stay connected to the vine and to one another, the branches. We also pray and resolve here today to be more attentive and responsive listeners.

How else can we hear Jesus' word and thus "remain" in him? Besides liturgical celebrations, there are many ways to place ourselves in a listening mode; open to the possibility of hearing God's Word. Some immediately come to mind: parish scripture prayer groups and bible study classes; private prayer, scripture reading and meditation; reading past and present spiritual writers, etc.

But God speaks in other, perhaps less "formal" or obvious ways through conversations with family and friends; counselors and self-help groups; casual conversations with people whose paths we cross daily, etc. We remember too Jesus telling us that he could be found among the poor and outcasts. When we are with them, we also strive to be listeners. Besides one-on-one encounters with people in need, what about those reports that come our way through print and internet media about social problems in our community, nation and around the world? Can the media also be an instrument Jesus uses to speak his words to us and help us "remain" in him and "bear much fruit?"

In the opening to our second reading, John spells out to us the fruit we will bear in union with Jesus, "Children, let us love not in word or speech, but indeed and truth."

FAITH BOOK

Mini-reflections on the Sunday scripture readings designed for persons on the run. "Faith Book" is also brief enough to be posted in the Sunday parish bulletins people take home.

From today's Gospel reading:

Jesus said, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower.

He takes away every branch in me that does not bear fruit,
and every one that does he prunes so that it bears more fruit.

Reflection:

If God has any “pruning” to do so that we can become more fruitful disciples of Jesus, it can happen when we are attentive to the Word at our Eucharist. What we hear may help us realize how often we have missed or ignored God’s gracious outreach to us. Having heard that Word will keep us connected to Jesus the Vine and give us renewed energy and desire to bear fruit as his disciples.,

So, we ask ourselves:

- When have I felt God has spoken a special word to me?
- What have I done to respond to what I have heard?

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

"Children, let us love not in word or speech, but in deed and truth."

(1 John 3:18)

This weekend on Mothers’ Day, while many mothers are celebrating with their children, tens of thousands of mothers are homeless. Family homelessness has emerged as a serious global problem. Our US Catholic Bishops say:

"The lack of safe, affordable housing requires a renewed commitment to increase the supply of quality housing and to preserve, maintain, and improve existing housing through public/private partnerships, especially with religious groups and community organizations. The USCCB continues to oppose unjust housing discrimination and to support measures to meet the credit needs of low-income and minority communities." *(US Catholic Bishops' letter: Faithful Citizenship)*

Did you know?

- The number of homeless persons on any one night in Raleigh is estimated to be nearly 1500 and 46,000 across the State. The average age of a homeless family member is 4 years old.
- A study conducted by the U.S. Conference of Mayors found 23% of all requests for emergency shelter went unmet due to lack of resources. For families, the numbers are worse: 29% of emergency shelter requests from families were denied.
- Requests for assisted housing by low-income families and individuals increased

in 86 percent of the cities during the last year.

- Nationally, an estimated 1.2 million children are homeless.
- A poor child in the US is more likely to live in a working family than to be on government assistance.
- Sacred Heart Cathedral participates in the Support Circle Ministry and has helped a single mom and her 3 children find work, housing and independence.

What you can do:

- Join Sacred Heart's MICAH ministry in its service to homeless families in Wake Interfaith Hospitality Network. For information call Anne and Bill Werdel at 865-8966.
- Watch the bulletin for ways to help our Support Circle family.
- Make a contribution to Sacred Heart's "Door Fund" which helps families avoid eviction and homelessness.

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

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I post in this space several inmates' names and addresses. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know we have not forgotten 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:

- Leslie Warren #0487180 (On death row since 10/6/95)
- Darrell Strickland #0393145 (10/27/95)
- Jerry Dale Hill #0511057 (10/31/95)

-----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, N.C. 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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

"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, [Click Here](#).

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Thank you. -

“Blessings on your preaching”

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