

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 6TH. SUNDAY OF EASTER
ACTS 10: 25-26, 34-35, 44-48 Psalm 98 1 JOHN 4: 7-10 JOHN 15: 9-17
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

There was a controversy a couple years ago in Washington, D.C. over the design and construction of a memorial dedicated to F.D.R. Organizations representing the handicapped objected to the original plan. They wanted the memorial to depict F.D.R. in a wheelchair, since he had been crippled by polio and got around either in a wheelchair or with the aid of crutches. In his lifetime F.D.R. did not want pictures taken of him in either condition. In fact, he had designed his own memorial, a single block of stone to be placed outside a federal building. There was to be no wheelchair; nor any sign of his handicap.

So it is with many leaders, they make plans for what will happen after they die. They try to orchestrate how they will be remembered. Some write books, prepare their memoirs, build mausoleums, design libraries to house their writings, speeches and photographs taken of them during their lifetime. If they see the end coming, they will give speeches, "last discourses." If they die unexpectedly, followers will hasten to gather their last words and actions for an interested public.

Today's gospel is from Jesus' "Last Discourse" (The Discourse in John's Gospel covers chapters 14,15,16 and 17). Sections from the Last Discourse have formed our gospel selections for the past two Sundays, as well as at our daily Eucharists. Jesus is speaking before his death, addressing the community that will be continuing his presence in the world. This last discourse has the characteristics of other famous last speeches narrated in the stories of great people. A famous person gathers disciples around for one last teaching before an imminent departure. This is a moment of important announcements, predictions and last instructions. Last words of great people are famous in history. We are interested to learn what they said, what was foremost in their minds and hearts as they saw the end coming.

First, notice in general how consoling and optimistic these words of Jesus are. He could have been pessimistic as he saw the end approaching and reflected how little he seemed to have accomplished. He could have been filled with anxious warnings. He could have said words of self-aggrandizement or made attempts at preserving his life. Instead, his concern is for them. He is not filled with anxiety,

nor is he filled with finger-waving warnings. Rather his words are reassuring and promising. How will he be remembered? What will remind them of him? What will make his memory fresh and present to future disciples?

Last week we heard that his followers will never lose touch with him, they form part of a living plant. He is the Vine, and they are the branches. They will depend on Christ for their life and vitality. His life will flow through them and be the source of their fruitfulness in the world. He has made his life a gift to them and also to us. This gift of life flows through us now. We are not on our own, trying to remember what our fallen leader said 2,000 years ago, trying to keep his memory alive among us. Instead, he is alive now, and we can live out his dream for ourselves and others by drawing on his life force within us.

Nor are we without companions on the journey. We heard there are other branches on this vine, we form one plant lovingly cared for by our nurturing God. Jesus sees us all connected to him and thus, to one another through him. He tells this connected community to love one another. The memorial our leader leaves the world is not in granite or steel, but in a living, loving community. His concern in this part of the discourse focuses first on his disciples, the community that will remain once he is gone. He does not want this community to be a memory in the minds of future generations, but a living present reality in each subsequent age. Such a community will be a living memorial to its founder, it will be known by its love for each other.

This community, like its Founder, will be a Word spoken in the world, a Word of love, a concrete sign of God's love freely given to us. This continual Word of love, spoken in each generation, will draw others to itself, the way Jesus' followers were drawn to him, a Word in the darkness of a cold world. These others are the "other sheep" Jesus spoke of two weeks ago, those he wants to hear his voice and follow him. Through the loving community Jesus leaves behind as his memorial, others will hear his voice and be drawn to it.

The preacher might want to focus this week's preaching on the love Jesus highlights in this section of the discourse. This second part of the Vine passage calls us to the "greater love" and the giving of one's own life. This love applies first of all to Christ. It is only possible for us because of his sacrifice and our being empowered through our connection to Vine. Notice Jesus' calling us "friends." This is the same title used to describe Lazarus. We have been made, through

friendship with Jesus, friends of God. This relationship established with God for us by Christ enables us to approach God as other "friends" of God have done. We stand in confident relationship with God and can be bold in our approach, as was Moses, another friend of God.

This passage begins with the notion of "sending" and keeping specific commands. The pattern of the Son's life is fashioned by his being sent by God and his being given a mandate from God. The two are bound together by intense and intimate love. Just as Jesus' life was determined by God's love, so our lives are determined by the Son's love. Love was the force that impelled Jesus and that bound him to God's will. Love is also a powerful force that impels us to be obedient to God and to serve others. Jesus assures us that such love is not a burden but brings joy with it.

We want to be in union with Christ and would expect a long list of commands subsequent upon this union. Instead, he explains how to live in his love and have the accompanying joy: we must love one another. Love of God is not a separate other-worldly experience. Rather, it is expressed in concrete ways that flow from the way Christ loved us. We don't love others because we have to; we are not slaves who just follow orders. We love one another because Jesus, the Vine, has called us friends and continues to pour his nourishing and self-giving love into us.

QUOTABLE: Preaching on the Death Penalty

(As I write this week's reflections the New Hampshire legislature is debating ending the death penalty in that state. The radio news announcer I was just listening to, also passes on information that there is a rising tide of opinion against the death penalty in this country. The governor of Illinois has cancelled executions there because of the 13 people found innocent who were on death row. Here are two pertinent quotes you might use in your preaching if you decide to include the death penalty in your preaching. Certainly, the teaching on Jesus' love for us in today's Gospel, makes such a preaching a possibility. Even a murderer is not exempt from Jesus' love. And aren't we called to love the way Jesus did?)

"Human life must never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil. Modern society has the means of protecting itself without denying criminals the chance to reform."

- Pope John Paul II, speaking in St. Louis

Marietta Jaeger Lane, whose 7-year-old daughter was murdered, from: “Not in My Susie’s Name”:

"If people are genuinely concerned with the victim family's plight, there should instead be a clamor for the legal and social measures which will provide the real support systems these families need in their time of anguish and irrevocable loss—financial assistance, therapeutic counsel, trial information, resolution, etc. Victim families have every right to the normal, valid human response of rage and hatred. However, to legislate that same gut-level desire for bloodthirsty revenge will have the same deleterious effect on the community as it does on individuals. It degrades, dehumanizes, and debilitates us as a society. The capacity for mercy and compassion is what sets us apart from the rest of creation. Our laws should call us to higher moral principles than the practice of primitive acts of more murders to resolve our conflicts, hatreds, fears and frustrations. We violate our own honor and dignity by unabashedly killing a chained, restrained, defenseless person, however deserving of death we deem that person to be. We become that which we deplore—people who kill people—as insult to the memory of our beloved victims."

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Thank you,
“Blessings on your preaching”
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