

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 16TH. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME B
Jeremiah 23: 1-6 Psalm 23 Ephesians 2: 13-18 Mark 6: 30-34

Dear Preachers:

I will be focusing on the second reading this weekend. It is the heart, the key message in the entire letter to the Ephesians. It comes from a section of the epistle that speaks of the benefits offered to both Gentiles ("you") and Jews ("we") through the life, death and resurrection of Christ. The writer seems to be aware of a prophecy from Isaiah (57:18-19). The prophet says that God notices a faithless people are suffering from their infidelities. They are exhausted from their rebelliousness against God. God saw their ways (Is. 57:18) and withdrew from them but now has mercy on them. "Peace, peace to the far off and the near." The prophet was writing to the Jews in exile ("far off"), but the author of the epistle applies the image to those non-Jews, the Gentiles, who accepted the Gospel message. Just as blood sacrifice reconciled the Jewish community in covenant to God, so the blood of Christ has reconciled us to each other and to God.

The preacher might want to begin by describing "the problem"--the separations that are part of daily life. We call others "those people," "they" and we refer to "their kind." We say, "Those people come over to our country and expect...." or "They just don't appreciate hard work."

"They" are the strangers in our midst, people from another country, with accents, a different shade of skin, different customs of religion and food, and different ways of being family. Or maybe they don't come from another land, but live in a different part of town. They might even go to the same church we do, but attend another Mass, the traditional one or the contemporary "folk Mass". Whoever "they" are, they are different, strangers in many ways to us. And we fear strangers, they threaten our status, our ways of thinking and our view of life. We are all in need of the reconciliation spoken of in this epistle.

The Jewish people had observed the Law given them by Moses and amplified it, built a fence around it through generations of commentators. This Law was meant as a way to respond to God's gracious initiative toward "the People," by setting out guidelines for living a good life in God's eyes. But the same law became a dividing line between both Jews and Gentiles, a way of separating "them" from "us." That was not the original intention of the Law. Truly, people had gone "far

off" from God's original intention.

Each of us makes that trip in our own way. We go apart, set ourselves at a distance from God and from others. We even become strangers to ourselves. We wonder what happened to that more devout, idealistic or kinder person we used to be. Even if we weren't that former better self of our imagination, we certainly aren't happy with aspects of ourselves now. So, there are "barriers of hostility" that separate us--- even from ourselves. God has seen our human condition and come to our help in Christ, whom God has made "one new humanity in place of the two".

The writer is saying that the former observances and customs that separated us, are done away with in Christ. If we accept the good news he announced, we are united in that new faith, and all of us can be one, "you who were far off and those who were near." Our access to God is the same for all of us; God is accessible to all, regardless of our former observances or even lack of religion. A new creation has occurred; a new people of God has been made from people who formerly were enemies.

What saves us then, is not that some have kept all the rules and done the right things all their lives; while others are/were oblivious to God and have no "track record" of church attendance or observance of religious custom. What saves us, the author reminds us, is that we all have access to God because we believe in Christ. As a result of that faith, believing in a new reality that is based on God's creative, gracious gift, we believers are enabled to keep the proper observance of a faithful people. We serve God, not to win God's favor, but because we have found out about how God has favored us through "the announcing of the good news of peace." We are a freed people and serve willingly, we experience a unity with one another brought about by God in Christ. How far are we from God? ----not far at all, the epistle reminds us, thanks to Christ.

So, how goes our living response to the unity God has achieved for us? We need to look again at those we call "strangers." We need to see them not as different from us, but as essentially the same. Ephesians is inviting us to look at ourselves and others in a different light, a light created by God. We need to look at the barriers we have set up, or that are part of the local and larger world in which we live. Barriers are not to exist between us. What are they? How do I contribute to them, add bricks and mortar to their construction?

Think of the racial, economic and social barriers that mark the terrain of our daily lives and determine whom we see, touch and share our lives. These walls direct our footsteps, where we go and whose terrain we avoid. Think of the gender barriers between us, how we think and talk about each other; how we relate to one another at work and at home. Think of the way we classify each other at church; the liberals and conservatives, the "old timers" who built the parish church and the newcomers; the clergy, religious and laity. There are walls all over the place! Yet Christ has enabled us to view each other differently. How will we act out of the new view, this new creation? The preacher might want to tailor the reconciliation rite at the beginning of our liturgy this weekend to express where we experience barriers in our world and, with the community, call upon God's mercy to help us tear them down.

When people are shunted aside because they are different, we need to offer them hospitality, some space of welcome in which they can be themselves. Hospitality means people don't have to conform to our ways, but that they can be themselves in our presence. It doesn't try to change people but enables them freedom and space to change at their own pace in their own way.

SOME RESOURCES FOR PREACHING JUSTICE:

The following documents from the National Conference of Catholic Bishops/U.S. Catholic Conference explore issues of -----GLOBAL SOLIDARITY. To obtain copies or more information call: 1-800-235-8722.

Practicing Global Solidarity

A Jubilee Call for Debt Forgiveness, 1999

Called to Global Solidarity, 1998

Sowing the Weapons of War, 1995

One Family Under God, 1995

The Harvest of Justice Is Sown in Peace, 1993

War in the Balkans: Moral Challenges, Policy Choices, 1993

Statements on South Africa, 1993, 1994

Refugees: A Challenge to Solidarity, 1992

The New Moment in Eastern and Central Europe, March 1990

The Harvest of Justice Is Sown in Peace, 1993

Toward Peace in the Middle East, 1989

Relieving Third World Debt, 1989

USCC Statement on Central America, 1987

QUOTABLE

Whatever there is to say, no one will listen to us unless we can offer them evidence of our own relationship to silence. If we simply dip our cups into the noisy torrent of the world and serve it up with a little theological parsley on top, people will learn to look elsewhere for food. At the very least, we owe them words we have dug up with our own hands, words we have brought back from our own encounter with the silence. Our authority to speak is rooted in our ability to remain silent. ---Barbara Brown Taylor in, *WHEN GOD IS SILENT*, Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1998, page 98.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,
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