

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 25TH . SUNDAY (B)

Wisdom 2: 12, 17-20 Psalm 54 James 3: 16-4:3 Mark 9: 30-37

By *Jude Siciliano*, OP

Dear Preachers:

If I am reading this Gospel correctly, Jesus is not telling the disciples to become like little children. That's what he says elsewhere. In this passage he doesn't tell them to be a child, he tells them to "welcome a child such as this for my sake." He is saying we are to serve the child, the one who is powerless, without rights, authority and claim over us.

This is the second of three well-known passages in Mark (8:27-10:45) that predict Jesus' upcoming suffering and death. Three times he predicts the passion; three times he is misunderstood. The literary form for the three passages is similar: first Jesus predicts the suffering, rejection, death and resurrection (8:31; 9:31, 10:33-34); then the disciples express that they don't get it (8:32; 9:32-34; 10:35-41); then Jesus teaches them about discipleship. Fred Craddock notes that, though the Resurrection is mentioned, the primary focus is on the suffering. Jesus is emphasizing the cross and so is not only teaching about his own messiahship but is spelling out the terms of following him. The problem of the disciples is that their preoccupation with position and power has made it impossible for them to hear him. At the very time he is teaching about his upcoming death, they are talking about power. The teacher is teaching, but the students are distracted. They are afraid to question him; wouldn't you be? Who wants to hear this type of teaching when we are thinking of success and position?

He sits down and calls them around him; the way a teacher does when summoning children for an important lesson. He treats them as children who need to be patiently taught. He is patient with them, for he is presenting them with a difficult way and it doesn't make immediate sense to them. What does it take to understand? Is it a matter of I.Q.? Or schooling? This (and other sayings of Jesus) is an aphorism, a maxim--- something that isn't immediately obvious and needs pondering. Mere logic does not reveal the truth it contains, nor do the mores of our society. One learns the truth of what Jesus says by pondering it and trying to put it into action.

He is speaking about suffering, but not the suffering that comes with serious illness or death of a loved one. The suffering he speaks of comes because a disciple has been invited to follow and this following means voluntarily embracing, welcoming and serving the least. This service will

require a giving of oneself while expecting nothing in return.

A minister of the Christian Reformed Church, John Rottman, has an opening to a sermon on this passage that I like:

In the 1920's there was a rather famous book entitled, "THE MAN NOBODY KNOWS. The author, John Barton, was an advertising executive. In the book, he describes Jesus as the founder of a modern business. He saw Jesus as a regular human with real executive abilities who picked very ordinary people from the bottom ranks of business and forged them into an organization that conquered the world. Jesus, a virile, youthful, successful, back-slapping success story. He looks you in the face, sees your potential and encourages you to "go for it."

It's a picture of life that we still seem to ascribe to as we pursue happiness and success. We give such approval to people who do well. It's as if their success confirms them as reputable people, people having high standing in the ranks of humanity. We admire the CEO who gets \$300 million stock option at the end of a year for a job well done. We are taught to pursue success; no sacrifice is too much. Recently a 27-year-old accountant told me he was working every night till about 7 or 8 pm at his large brokerage firm and getting home around 8. He is hoping for a large bonus at Christmas. Meanwhile, he is married only two years, and he and his wife barely see each other.

The disciples are gauging their lives in terms of success. But Jesus changes the subject. His miracles show he certainly was aware of people's physical needs and hurts. But when the subject of importance and success come up he diverts our attention. He mentions his own betrayal, suffering and death. Here's the contradiction. In the morning mail we are offered a gold card and a bonus of 2000 miles on our frequent flyer program or 200 free minutes on a new cell phone--- if we sign up. Jesus sends another offer--the cross. No wonder they don't understand. And who wants to ask more questions? Let's change the subject. But to really make it clear what he has in mind for us, he scoops up a child, hugs her and places her in front of them.

Let's avoid romanticizing childhood at this point. We live in a different culture than the one of this story. In the ancient society to which Jesus belonged, children were not the center of attention they are in our circles. They did not have the same rights as adults. For example, if food were lacking, the adults would be fed first, then the children. They were loved, but could be severely disciplined as well, to help them become adults. It was a time of 30% infant mortality and 60% of children were dead by 16. To exalt the child in front of them was to insult these

status-seeking disciples.

We are asked to embrace the child, that is, the one who stands in our midst and speaks need to us---need to be fed, clothed, washed, taught, embraced, spoken lovingly to, etc. His followers were to have concern for those who were not important. To welcome a child is to welcome one of low status and this "guest" might not tell anyone else of the welcome or trumpet the name of the host to others. What was to be gained by the disciple for such an act of hospitality?

What would the Jesus of Bruce Barton's book do about these dense disciples? He would get rid of us, throw his hands up and go look for another group to train. He'd cut his losses, find some others who would catch on faster than we do. Instead, he takes his disciples and us aside and once again explains it all to us--- all over again. In this Gospel of Mark, he will have to go through this again---and they still won't get it. But the disciple who has followed Jesus' teaching knows what he means and knows how life comes through such giving of oneself to another. We admit this message is hard to hear. We admit we have been distracted by other issues and agendas. We admit our discipleship is less than enthusiastic whenever the specter of the cross enters the scene.

There are many things we need to tend to this week. Certainly, we need to earn a living, feed our family, pay for tuition, encourage our students, cheer at the high school basketball game, etc. What we ask at this Eucharistic celebration is that we not lose our focus—that we not forget those without status, for in them Jesus is waiting to accept our hospitality. Perhaps the bishops' statement quoted below will help us see our responsibility to the least in our society during this election time.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Troeger, Thomas H. TEN STRATEGIES FOR PREACHING IN A MULTI MEDIA CULTURE. Nashville: Abingdom Press, 1996. (125 pages, \$12.95)

Troeger is well known for his writings on imagination, art and preaching. In this book he suggests ways to present the Word in a way that speaks to a world that is "audio visually oriented." This is not meant to be a book for a few technological experts. Rather, he makes some practical suggestions for how to creatively preach to hearers who are immersed in a multi-media culture. He presents 10 "strategies," gives theological reasons for their use and then has a sample preaching for each strategy to illustrate what he has in mind. Just the first and last chapters, in which

he gives theological foundations for the use of imagination in preaching, are worth getting the book. I liked this book; it presents ideas any conscientious preacher can use in his/her preaching.

During this election time in the United States, we continue quoting from:
Faithful Citizenship: Civic Responsibility for a New Millennium
(United States Catholic Conference/ National Conference of Catholic Bishops)

A Call to Faithful Citizenship

One of our greatest blessings in the United States is our right and responsibility to participate in civic life. The Constitution protects the right of individuals and of religious bodies to speak out without governmental interference, endorsement, or sanction. It is increasingly apparent that major public issues have clear moral dimensions and that religious values have significant public consequences. Our nation is enriched and our tradition of pluralism enhanced when religious groups contribute to the debate over the policies that guide the nation.

As bishops, it is not only our right as citizens but our responsibility as religious teachers to speak out on the moral dimensions of public life. As members of the Catholic community, we enter the public forum to act on our moral convictions, share our experience in serving the poor and vulnerable, and add our values to the dialogue over our nation's future. Catholics are called to be a community of conscience within the larger society and to test public life by the moral wisdom anchored in Scripture and consistent with the best of our nation's founding ideals. Our moral framework does not easily fit the categories of right or left, Democrat or Republican. Our responsibility is to measure every party and platform by how its agenda touches human life and dignity.

Jesus called us to love our neighbors by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for the sick and afflicted, and comforting the victims of injustice. Our Lord's example and words demand a life of charity from each of us. Yet they also require action on a broader scale in defense of life, in pursuit of peace, in support of the common good, and in opposition to poverty, hunger, and injustice. Such action involves the institutions and structures of society, economy, and politics. As Pope John Paul II wrote in his recent exhortation to the people of America living together in this hemisphere:

“For the Christian people of America conversion to the Gospel means to revise "all the different areas and aspects of life, especially those related to the social order

and the pursuit of the common good." It will be especially necessary "to nurture the growing awareness in society of the dignity of every person and, therefore, to promote in the community a sense of the duty to participate in political life in harmony with the Gospel.

"For Catholics, public virtue is as important as private virtue in building up the common good. In the Catholic tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue; participation in the political process is a moral obligation. Every believer is called to faithful citizenship, to become an informed, active, and responsible participant in the political process. As we said a year ago, "We encourage *all citizens*, particularly Catholics, to embrace their citizenship not merely as a duty and privilege, but as an opportunity [more fully] to participate in building the culture of life. Every voice matters in the public forum. Every vote counts. Every act of responsible citizenship is an exercise of significant individual power."

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Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching",

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