

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 26TH. SUNDAY (B)

Numbers 11: 25-29 Psalm 19 James 5: 1-6 Mark 9: 38-43, 47-48

By: *Jude Siciliano*, OP

Dear Preachers:

Dividing people between those who are "in" and those who are "out," starts early in life. Hidden video cameras showing kindergarten children at play reveal groupings of insiders and outsiders. Middle and high school students go to extremes in dress, behavior and even body-piercing to be "with it" or "cool". Exclusion by their contemporaries at this time of their lives can be painful, even driving some to suicide. We want to be accepted by our circle of family and friends, even if it means buying houses we can't afford, gadgets we don't really need and cars bigger than family or work demand. To maintain acceptance, we even keep silent when we should object to unkind behavior or conversation by our peers. Some people will pay enormous fees to get into the "right" country club; others will commit acts of violence in prisons to get into a powerful prison gang. The need to belong to the inner circles can be found in all age groups, cultures, religions, nationalities, races and in both genders.

There are those who even choose their church affiliation (or time of services) by the kinds of people in the congregation. They prefer to be with "our kind". People derive a sense of self-worth and a way of exerting power over others by belonging to a group that seems to be better than others. "We have made it, you haven't. We will use our status and influence to keep you in place." Unfortunately, the church isn't exempt from such power plays. Some among the hierarchy, local church clergy, members of parish councils, finance committees, etc. –all the religiously well-connected who control the reins in one way or another, face the temptation to hold power close to the vest; ignore or silence voices that differ from the established policy and brand as "radicals or "unorthodox" those who call for more openness and collaborative use of authority and power.

For example, in recent years the poor, immigrants and women have come forth to challenge the white, first-world and mostly male power structures in the church. Where do those on the margin find their voice and place? How are their voices heard in judging structures and theories? If there are people who, for one reason or another, are not treated with respect and as equals, then we hear an echo of the kind of exclusion the distinguished seventy-elders presented to Moses. The inner

circle complained that Eldad and Medad "were not in the gathering." They were not part of the inner circle, and the elders could not comprehend that the spirit that first rested on Moses, then given to them, could get outside the select company. But it did. That's just the kind of spirit God has always let loose in the world.

The first reading and gospel should make those of us closely aligned with institutional religion a bit uncomfortable, or at the least, cause us to examine our attitudes about those not officially on our role books. First of all, we do know the benefits of belonging to a faith community. Some of us not only participate in its functions, we are also ordained to permanently represent our religious communities in worship and the world. Others have taken public vows; many laity minister full-time in diocesan and parish administration; others volunteer as teachers, lectors, eucharistic ministers, sacristans and for hospitality and social outreach. Chances are, if you are reading these reflections, you and I are very invested in our church; we are its emissaries and visible representatives to the world.

But while we look around at our circle of believers and cherish our membership in it, we need to remember that the Spirit is not limited to one church or religious community in achieving God's purposes. God will inspire and accomplish God's will. God wants to be known among peoples of the world wants to instruct and guide, challenge and heal, reconcile enemies, feed the hungry, end wars and civil strife, raise up artists to inspire people ---- and God will do this within or without the institutional church; "in the gathering" of the elders or outside.

In the gospel, John complains to Jesus that a man who was not one of Jesus' inner circle ("he does not follow us") was performing powerful acts in Jesus' name. What kind of intolerance was John exhibiting? What was John afraid of losing or sharing if others did great works in Jesus' name? The disciples seem to think they are the privileged few, the distinguished recipients of Jesus' mission. They don't want others who are not subservient to them to be free to act in Jesus' name. But the disciples, as close as they may be to Jesus, cannot prevent his powers spreading beyond even them. Jesus does not set up detailed rules about those who qualify to be his disciples, rather he lays out a broad criterion: "For whoever is not against us is for us." So, the guideline for being "with Jesus" will be the behavior of people towards those in need.

Someone who gives, for example, a "cup of water" will be rewarded--- official membership or not. Jesus says the real certificate of membership to his company is

how we love and care for others. Then he speaks a note of caution. There are those who are not in the higher ranks of disciples, they are the "little ones." The disciples' claim of special privilege may prove to be a "stumbling block" and alienate the lesser members of the community. No individual can claim a special and restricted privilege over Jesus' mission. God's Spirit is quite capable of expressing itself in works of love by all kinds of people.

"For whoever is not against us is for us." We see these people all the time, doing things church folk are supposed to be doing---- feeding the hungry, working for peace, caring for the elderly, organizing clothing drives, running shelters for the homeless, volunteering in nursing homes, fighting for the environment, etc. In some of these places these "others" are even there before us. Church folk sometimes arrive late on the scene and when we arrive, we have to learn from the more experienced non-believers how to give ourselves generously for others. For example, we are just waking up to realizing that when we proclaim Jesus is the savior of the world, we are not just speaking about humans, but that his salvation includes the natural world and all its living creatures as well. Yet, in the past, we probably used to dismiss those who tried to protect the environment as "tree huggers."

The great theologian Karl Rahner taught that since there is only one God who reaches out to humanity through Jesus, that all people who are trying to do what is right, listening to their consciences and leading a good life, are, in effect, saying "Yes" to Jesus' message—even if they do not know it. He called them "anonymous Christians." Thus, he suggests, we members of the church should recognize in these "others" Jesus' grace at work. We don't have to accept his "anonymous Christian" term, but he is strong in his teaching that everyone whose life reveals the good will and work of God is somehow saved in Christ and doing his work. Some people don't visibly belong to "our group," but it is clear by the sacrifices they make for others and the energies they expend without interest in personal gain, that Jesus' Spirit has, as usual, broken out of the clerical, parochial or orthodox confines we have constructed and has seeped into the world.

JUSTICE NOTES

This is a follow-up on a recent personal note I wrote in this space. On Friday, September 2nd.

at 2 am, Henry Lee Hunt was executed in Raleigh's Central Prison. I had visited and written to Henry for 9 years. He had always protested his innocence. I witnessed the execution with his brother, son and two lawyers. There were serious concerns about his innocence. His lawyers told me there was evidence that could have been used to back Henry's claim of innocence that was "lost" by the Lumberton, NC police. Prosecutors withheld crucial information from the defense at the trial that would have seriously damaged its case against Henry. The witnesses who testified against him failed a polygraph test and got lighter jail terms. Henry passed two recent polygraph tests and his tester was convinced he was telling the truth. (This examiner is now against the death penalty.) Outrageously, with Henry facing death, the state still refused to turn over all of the evidence in its possession despite repeated requests.

POST CARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

The state of North Carolina is about to execute another inmate on September 26. Joseph Bates admitted killing Charles Jenkins, whom he'd never met until the night of the murder, because he thought Jenkins was plotting with Bates' ex-wife and her lover to get him. Important facts about Bates' mental health were not presented at trial and have never been fully explored in the courts. In particular, he suffered repeated traumatic head injuries in the years before the murder that changed his personality. Mental health experts have concluded that Joe Bates is paranoid and delusional; he has tried to commit suicide twice since his conviction. In fact, four jurors now say they might have decided against death had they known of his mental problems.

If you would: CONTACT NC GOV. MIKE EASLEY at:
Governor's Office, 20300 Mail Services Center, Raleigh, NC 27699-0300
Email: Clemency@ncmail.net
Fax: (919) 733-2120 or 715-3561
Tel: 1-800-662-7952 or (919) 733-5811

In addition to asking him to grant clemency for Joseph Bates, please ask him to declare an immediate moratorium on executions.

If you would like to drop a card to Joseph Bates #0023098:

Write to him at: Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606
Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

Jude Siciliano, OP

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