

“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:

I will be focusing on the Gospel for this reflection. It is a strong reading with puzzling aspects that will catch our hearers' curiosity when we proclaim it. Taken at face value, some of it makes Jesus sound extreme and out of touch. I think this passage has a history of being misapplied and the preacher will do well not to ignore it.

The beginning of the passage has a strong emphasis on belonging to the group. A key virtue in Jesus' time was loyalty to both the group to which one belonged and its leader. (In Hebrew and Greek, the word used for "faith" might better be translated "loyalty.") Jesus' disciples belong to his "company" and they don't want others to "horn in" on their group or appropriate Jesus for themselves. If people are casting out demons in Jesus' name and are not part of the group, they should be stopped. That's their notion of loyalty to Jesus and their group. But Jesus is saying that people don't have to belong to their party to be loyal to him.

He tells them not to try to stop this anonymous exorcist and warns against exclusiveness and overemphasis on their authority. The fact that this person does his work "in the name of Jesus," is valid enough proof of his authenticity. Jesus' followers are to see this man as a welcome collaborator in their work of overcoming evil and they are to welcome this cooperation, even when it comes from unexpected places. Jesus is telling us not to look for titles and labels, but to look for attitudes, actions and spirit. He rejoices whenever he encounters mercy, justice and compassion, for in seeing these, he sees the work of God in the world. Thus, Mark is reminding his church community not to use as a criteria whether or not a person belonged to "our company." How we are living Jesus' way of life is more the issue than whether or not we have the right documents or membership cards.

Families, nations and organizations have their sayings about loyalties and priorities. In families we say, "Blood is thicker than water"; in our nation we say, "My country right or wrong." But suppose we had to speak up in a family matter in which we felt an injustice was being done, a dishonest business practice was being followed, or a racial or ethnic stereotype being used? And what about "loyalty" to

our country as we examine some of our national policies? Would we speak out against the unfair treatment of minorities in our land? ...The overemphasis on military spending to the detriment of health care and education for our young? We have loyalties, but sometimes they are misplaced. The loyalty of the Christian is to Christ, our basic loyalty. Nothing is to get in the way of that loyalty and the part of the passage that speaks about "cutting off" and "tearing out," might be applied to the rather drastic changes we may need to make in our lives to express where our true loyalties lie.

This parish church in which we worship may be the building where we were baptized. If we had to prove we are Catholics, we could go to the office and get a copy of our baptismal certificate. We would have proof then if we wanted to get married, receive confirmation, become a sister, brother or priest, etc. But that's all we would have, the documentation to prove we were official. Jesus is saying people who really are his followers are so because their lives reflect it. To follow the pattern of his life requires a loyalty to him that is obvious in the works we do. People who work for large companies often find themselves making large sacrifices. Sacrifice and hard work is the name of the game in the competitive work world. We have to take ourselves very seriously as Christians as well. Hence the statement, in exaggerated form, that says in effect, God is even more important than important parts of your body. We need then, to make decisions in our lives that will set us free to serve God, to follow Christ. Following Christ requires sacrifice, that's not something we are eager to hear. As one preacher puts it, "We place comfort above character; we honor convenience above conscience, and we insist that our will and not God's be done."

Meanwhile, whatever is divisive in our parish community has to be "cut off," "torn out." There is no room in the community for in-fighting, comparisons, denunciations, or separations. If these occur, they are not "in his name" and are not "of our company." Since the death of Mother Theresa there have been many biographies written. What comes through in these biographies is that she was very much a Catholic, but she never limited her ministering to just "our company". Some Christian groups criticized her for this. Doing good for others is doing something in Jesus' name. People may practice their Christian faith in a variety of ways, but we must stop classifying them as being, or not being, of "our school" or "one of us." Who is a follower of Jesus, who works in his name? Those who make his spirit alive, his presence felt through their good deeds, are of the company of Jesus. So, we delight in the efforts of all who reach out with compassion,

whether they be Christian or not. Jesus has his own way of recognizing who belongs to "our company" and it has little to do with a membership card.

A quote from THE INTERPRETERS BIBLE, sums up this part of the passage: "These words of Jesus, then, are a rebuke to all our blind exclusiveness, our arrogant assumptions, that God's action in the world is limited to the forms which we are familiar. 'Something there is that does not love a wall.' It is the mind of God. The church has suffered terribly, and the world has suffered terribly, from this fence-building frenzy. If one tenth of the time which Christians have devoted to building fences had gone into building roads as a highway for God, the world would be a far better place today."

A word about the "simple believers" mentioned in the passage. The former translation used to say, "little ones" and it was applied to the sin of scandalizing children. But "simple believers" is the more accurate translation and it probably applied to those newly admitted into the Christian community. Those already in the community for a while, the "old-timers," were to be cautious and avoid setting bad example for the newer members. The reading says that our behavior has consequences, it can affect the "simple believers".

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Burghardt, Walter J., S.J., PREACHING: THE ART AND THE CRAFT. New York: Paulist, 1987.

Thirteen essays which share the author's 45 years of preaching experience. Well written, informative and imaginative, with honest reflections on his struggles during preaching preparation. Has a bibliographical essay and annotated bibliography of those preachers, past and present, who have helped him in his preaching ministry. A primarily Roman Catholic approach, the book assumes most preaching is done by men.

QUOTABLE

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

Catholic Assets in the Public Square

Our community of faith brings three major assets to these challenges.

A Consistent Moral Framework

The *Word of God and the teaching of the Church* give us a particular way of viewing the world. Scripture calls us to "choose life," to serve "the least of these," to "hunger and thirst" for justice and to be "peacemakers." Jesus called us to be the "leaven" in society, the "salt of the earth . . . [and] the light of the world."

Catholic teaching offers a consistent set of moral principles for assessing issues, platforms, and campaigns. Because of our faith in Jesus Christ, we start with the dignity of the human person. Our teaching calls us to protect human life from conception to natural death, to defend the poor and vulnerable, and to work toward a more just society and a more peaceful world. As Catholics, we are not free to abandon unborn children because they are seen as unwanted or inconvenient; to turn our backs on immigrants because they lack the proper documents; to turn away from poor women and children because they lack economic or political power. Nor can we neglect international responsibilities because the Cold War is over. For us, the duties of citizenship begin with Gospel values and Catholic teaching. No polls or focus groups can release us from the responsibility to speak up for the voiceless, to act in accord with our moral convictions.

Everyday Experience

Our community also brings *broad experience in serving those in need*. The Catholic community educates the young, cares for the sick, shelters the homeless, feeds the hungry, assists needy families, welcomes refugees, and serves the elderly.⁶ In defense of life, we reach out to children and to the sick and elderly who need help, support women in difficult pregnancies, and assist those wounded by the trauma of abortion and domestic violence. On many issues, we speak for those who have no voice; we have the practical expertise and everyday experience to enrich public debate.

A Community of Citizens The *Catholic community* is large and diverse. We are Republicans, Democrats, and Independents. We are members of every race, come from every ethnic background, and live in urban, rural, and suburban communities. We are CEOs and migrant farm workers, senators and persons on public assistance, business owners and union members. But we are all called to a common commitment to protect human life and stand with those who are poor and vulnerable. We cannot be indifferent to or cynical about the obligations of citizenship. As voters and advocates, candidates and contributors, we are called to

provide a moral leaven for our democracy.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,
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