

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:

Would you like a person-to-person phone call from some of the biggest and most powerful law firms in the country? Perhaps a bevy of lawyers will even ring your doorbell and pay you a visit. Would you like a personal letter, signed by the CEO of one of the richest international corporations in the world? Well, here's all you have to do: give your cozy, neighborhood coffee shop a new name – name it Starbucks. Or, if you're a coach for a Little League football team rip the team name off their uniforms and call them "the Microsoft Meteors." You might name your tiny computer repair store, "the Apple Shop."

It won't be long before your phone rings off the hook and your mailbox overflows with "Cease and Desist" letters from some very big law firms representing the aggrieved corporations. A lot of lawyers make a lot of money doing nothing but protecting corporate names and logos. Forget about it! You don't stand a chance! Big companies are eagle-eyed and fast to swoop in.

You can feel similar proprietary instincts in today's gospel. Jesus' disciples are concerned about some exorcist driving out demons using Jesus' name. They are ready to stop them; it's trademark infringement and they don't take it lightly. They are part of Jesus' inner circle and feel that they alone have been explicitly given the authority by Jesus to drive out demons. They want to limit Jesus' ministry to the "proper channels" – and that means them.

But that's not how Jesus sees it. He came to do good for all who needed his help, and he wasn't about to limit who could dispense that good or, for that matter, who was considered worthy to receive it. His is a ministry of super-abundance and generosity; while his disciples are concerned about proper channels and copyrights in the name of Jesus. Can we extend this gospel still further? Let's see.

Jesus came to heal the sick and help the poor. If a doctor dedicates her life; giving of her free time; not charging indigent patients who don't have health care; even providing free medication – but doesn't explicitly invoke the name of Jesus – would she also come under Jesus' banner – "For whoever is not against us is for

us”? Mother Theresa thought if you gave a cup of water to a thirsty person out of love, you were in fact a follower of Jesus. While we don’t need to “baptize” every good non-believer for their works still, we can say they are living in a way Jesus would recognize and applaud.

But even people who profess to be Christian have trouble accepting Jesus’ teaching of tolerance. We Christians have gone so far as to wage violent wars against one another invoking Jesus’ name. In addition, the violent conquests of South and Central America were done by Christian nations from Europe, accompanied by clergy ready to baptize the natives forcibly brought to the font –after being tortured. What does professing Jesus’ name mean for us? First of all, it means living the life that Jesus lived. If we do, we will be able to drive out many demons in his name – the demons of intolerance, injustice, local strife, long-held grudges, poverty and a long list of other demons.

The context of today’s story suggests another approach. The disciples’ question and their concern for proper channels and procedures may also have been a distraction from the real issue at hand – once again – living life in Jesus’ name. In the chapter preceding today’s selection Peter has professed his faith in Jesus as the Messiah. Immediately Jesus makes his first prediction of his passion (8:31). He does the same just after today’s selection – another prediction of the passion (9:30-32). As if not hearing him at all, the disciples are caught arguing about “who was the most important” (9:34). Then they raise their concern about the unofficial exorcist they encountered. If they missed Jesus’ two predictions of his passion, they surely didn’t hear him say that any follower of his would have to deny self, take up their cross and follow in his steps (8:34).

We had better be careful about what we claim to be doing and saying, “in Jesus’ name.” We would be advised to be less dogmatic and strive to live more evident Christian lives – in his name. We would also do well to reflect on our own prejudices: religious, political, social, economic, racial, gender, etc. If we think we don’t have any, ask someone who loves us what they perceive as our prejudices. Then be prepared to be surprised.

Jesus reflects God for us. His teaching reveals a bigger picture of God than many of us have. Our God may be too small. Today’s gospel reflects a big open-handed God. So does our first reading. We see in the Book of Numbers that God wasn’t limited in bestowing some of the spirit given to Moses on just those 70 elders who

got to the meeting tent on time. The absent Eldad and Medad also got their spirit and they too prophesied in the camp. God and God's gifts are not just limited to official people, places and times. Joshua, Moses' aide, like the disciples, has much to learn about God. Our "inner circle" doesn't limit God's presence and activity. People may not belong to our group or be loyal to us – but can still be touched by God. Moses and Jesus affirm God's big heart and gracious, open hands.

Jesus' reference to causing "these little ones" to sin may not have been a reference to children, but to those new to the faith – "these little ones who believe in me." New converts might still have a tentative foothold in the community and if they experience unseemly behavior on the part of the more seasoned members, the newest members ("the little ones") might stumble – even leave the community.

In many parishes I visit I meet newly baptized people who went through their preparation for baptism, or their return to the church, in the RCIA process. They frequently say what inspired and kept them in the process was the example of their sponsors and program directors. I've also met people who pulled out of the process because they felt like second-class citizens and weren't treated hospitably. One woman said, "They treated us like children." Today would be a good day to pray for candidates in the RCIA and for their sponsors and teachers.

Jesus gets rather glum in the last section of the gospel today. He talks about cutting off the hand and foot or plucking out an eye. Ugh! But, to tell you the truth, when I was a kid I heard some of my Mediterranean-born uncles and aunts use such exaggerated language. It made for a colorful speech, and we kids got the point. Jesus was middle eastern and seems to have used similar vivid and exaggerated language. We get the point too – don't we?

Jesus knows the consequences of sin for the community. One person might sin, but it's the whole community that suffers. He's calling us to take charge of our lives and make whatever changes we have to in order to live his life. It can feel like cutting off a part of ourselves when we: try to break a harmful habit we've had for a long time; simplify our lives so we can have more time for others; reduce our material excesses so as to help those who have less; focus less on ourselves so we can be more attentive to those immediately around us; open our eyes and ears to the larger world of the poor; reduce our wasteful use of our earth's resources, etc.

Making significant changes in our lives can feel like major surgery or, as Jesus

puts it, like chopping off a hand or foot or plucking out an eye. Who wants to do that! We do, if we have heard Jesus' invitation to follow him. And we can because at this Eucharist we are again being offered transforming grace.

FAITH BOOK

Mini-reflections on the Sunday scripture readings designed for persons on the run. "Faith Book" is also brief enough to be posted in the Sunday parish bulletins people take home.

From today's Gospel reading:

"If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off....
If your foot causes you to sin, cut it off....
And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out."

Reflection:

Jesus tells us to cut off a hand or foot or pluck out an eye if they cause us to sin. We get the point – don't we? Sin is serious, not just for us, but for the community. One person might sin; but the whole community suffers – especially "the little ones" – those whose faith is vulnerable. He's calling us to make whatever changes we must to live his life, He knows making serious change can be as painful as cutting off a limb. So, he is here to encourage and enable us.

So, we ask ourselves:

- What necessary changes must I make now to follow Jesus more closely?
- What's holding me back?
- Do I believe he will be there to help me, once I determine to do something?

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

"Behold, the wages you withheld from the workers ... are crying aloud."(
James 5:1-4)

"Global interconnectedness has led to the emergence of a new political power, that of consumers and their associations...It is good for people to realize that purchasing is always a moral — and not simply economic act". (*Pope Benedict, Charity in Truth #66*)

"Consumer choices and consumer demands are moral and cultural expressions of how we conceive of life. What and how much we consume manifest our conception of who we are and why we exist. The spiritual and cultural impoverishment that are the natural by-products of consumerism are evident everywhere" (*The Good Life from a Catholic Perspective: The Problem*

of Consumption)

<http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/ejp/background/articles/consumption.shtml>

October is “**Fair Trade Month**”. Our global economic system with its mega-corporations and multiple vendors makes it difficult to *buy fairly*. As Christians none of us wants to hear the words in today’s letter from St. James, “*The wages you withheld from the workers are crying aloud*”, spoken of us. There is one way to make sure that the workers who produce the food and clothing we purchase are paid just wages. When our purchases are “Fairly Traded”, we can be certain workers have been treated fairly and that we are advancing economic justice.

Did you know?

Sacred Heart’s *Global Outreach Ministry* sells Fair Trade coffee and tea on the 3rd weekend of every month.

Catholic Relief Services has a Fair-Trade program that is endorsed by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops: www.crsfairtrade.org/

Each time a person or parish buys coffee, chocolate or crafts from a CRS Fair Trade partner, a contribution is made to the Fair-Trade Fund. Twice a year the fund awards development grants to artisan and farmer groups overseas and market-building grants in the United States.

What you can do:

- **Watch Sacred Heart’s bulletin for Fair Trade events planned by our Global Outreach Ministry.**
- **Commit to buying at least one product, which you purchase regularly, (coffee, chocolate, tea) from fair trade vendors- then add a second product.**
- **Join our Sacred Heart Global Outreach Ministry. Volunteer at our monthly Fair-Trade Marketplace and help expand relationships with our brothers and sisters in Latin America as well as Africa. See Bulletin for contact information.**

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, N. C.)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I post in this space several inmates' names and addresses. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know we have not forgotten them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, *"People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."* If the inmate responds you might consider becoming pen pals.

Please write to:

- David Gainey #0139378 (On death row since 7/13/99)
- Billy Anderson #0007328 (10/26/99)
- Iziah Barden #0491889 (11/12/99)

Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, N.C. 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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

"First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, [Click Here](#).

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Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching",

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