

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 29TH. SUNDAY (B)

Isaiah 53: 10-11 Psalm 33 Hebrews 4: 14-16 Mark 10: 35-45

By: *Jude Siciliano*, OP

Dear Preachers:

I write this at the end of September. I am preaching this week across the bay from San Francisco, California. The recall election rhetoric here is in full swing. There are a lot of candidates vying to be number one in this state, they want to unseat the governor and take his place. There is a lot of power and prestige riding on this election. The winner may well be looking to national office somewhere down the line. If you are a baseball fan this is the place to be. Late-in-the-season baseball brings both the Oakland and San Francisco major league teams here closer to the playoffs. People are excited about a potential world series victory on the horizon. What makes some football fans sad is the miserable beginning of the season for the San Francisco Forty-Niners. We want our favorite teams to win, and when they do, we feel like winners along with them. No one wants to be associated with a loser. As the renowned football coach Vince Lombardi once said, "Winning isn't everything--- it's the only thing."

The disciples wanted to be winners too and Jesus' powers and popularity only fed their anticipation of victory. Today's gospel episode shows how much they misunderstood Jesus' teachings about discipleship: they missed completely his predictions of his upcoming suffering. (In fact, the text right before today's is his third prediction of the passion.) The disciples have been in training under Jesus' tutelage as he leads them to Jerusalem. Time is running out; they have reached the outskirts of the city. How little they have learned during their travels with him about being his disciples. If they were taking an academic exam at the end of a semester, they would probably flunk the course! Did they play hooky on the days Jesus taught about denying themselves in order to follow him?....about not wanting places of honor at banquets?...about being hearers of the Word? Were they out of class when Jesus talked about how hard it would be for the rich and powerful to enter the reign of God? ...or about accepting the reign of Godlike children? What frustration Jesus must have felt upon hearing John and James' request!

The disciples who boldly make the request to Jesus are looking ahead, providing for their future. Isn't that what we encourage our children to do as they enter a new school year or ponder their future jobs? We want them to think about their goals;

what they want to achieve in their lives. In order to see their goals reach fruition, students may have to give up a free summer to take an extra course or two. Maybe they will have to cut back on extra-curricular activities, buckle down and study harder. Or, they may have to resign themselves to "stay the course," just keep working hard right up to the end of a semester or school year. Students like this, unlike the disciples in today's story, seem to have a better understanding that sacrifice is involved in fulfilling a dream.

The disciples can't be blamed too severely for their obtuseness. All their lives they imbibed the same lessons we do about power, wealth, prestige and ranking. They expected the messiah would overthrow the political and religious status quo----and then place them in the revised hierarchy of power and wealth. Soon, they thought it would be their turn to be in charge. John and James voiced what the others were thinking. The disciples weren't upset with the two brothers for their crass request—they were upset because John and James got to Jesus ahead of them with the same request they would have made. Jesus was their "meal ticket," they thought, to power, prestige and position.

Yes, there will be a final victory for Jesus and his disciples. But Jesus makes it clear that he and they will have to pass through a time of sacrifice. Indeed, they will have to be "slave to all." Not exactly what the ambitious disciples or we hoped to hear! It isn't that Jesus wants pain and degradation for himself and his disciples. It just seems inevitable for them if they continue on the path they have been with him. Jesus' way is so contrary to the world's. Jesus' suffering comes as a result of his choosing to identify with the disenfranchised and the outcast. He chose to reach out to sinners and welcome into his company those who were unacceptable to the religious and social elite. His life was a service to those who were usually ignored or passed over. Jesus' witness of constant love for all, no matter who they were or where they came from, was the instigation for his death. He was on a collision course with the reigning religious and political powers. And if his disciples follow him and act and think as he did, then they and we will be on the same collision course. Suffering happens to those who choose the same life of service and sacrificial love Jesus did. That's what he has been preparing them for by his predictions of what will happen to him in Jerusalem.

But discipleship isn't something forced on anyone. It is as if, at this stage of the gospel, Jesus is extending another invitation to his disciples to follow him. But now we realize better what being his followers entails. At the beginning of the

gospel Jesus invited the disciples to follow him; they were free to accept or reject his offer. Now he is asking again if they want to follow: "Can you drink the cup that I drink...." More is involved in being a disciple than we first realized and sometimes we don't discover this till later on our journey. An earlier enthusiastic "yes" is now tempered with a strong dose of reality. We realize now that pain and sacrifice are part of the "field" we bought when we said "yes" to the invitation Jesus extended to us. Do we still want to say "yes," especially as we watch what will happen soon to him when he enters Jerusalem?

We look for greatness in the big events and achievements of famous people. The tower of Babel is always a temptation for us—we are children of the tower of Babel, always wanting to go higher. Unfortunately, even those of us in church ministry are tempted to want rank and positions of importance. Jesus' teaching today causes us to reexamine how we view success and importance, both within and without church circles. In Jesus' kingdom-perspective, the "great" are those who serve others. Today's gospel opens our eyes to the true greatness that surrounds us in daily life. We will need to look again at those who, in quiet ways, serve without receiving praise; help without thanks and remain faithful to daily responsibilities without fanfare and awards.

In the parish where I am currently preaching, a group of senior citizens are key to keeping the St. Vincent de Paul Society alive and vital. (This is the parish-based organization that feeds the local hungry by collecting food from parishioners and delivering it to the needy.) I was told by a person on the staff here that without these older folks, the Society would collapse, and the program would end. Yet, as crucial to this ministry as these people are, they are very modest in their appearances and demeanor. They just do their ministry in frequent and quiet ways. The hungry get fed--- that is all they seem to care about. Today's gospel helps us to see the true greatness of people like them.

READER'S RESPONSE

We still appreciate receiving your weekly e-mail. We have been getting it since you conducted the retreat at St Bernadette(Scottsdale Arizona) back in 1999. While I am not a preacher, we do use your insights at our weekly Small Church Community meetings. Your message this week on divorce was true. My wife and I came close, but for the last ten years we have worked in a ministry called Retrouvaille. For your information there is a web site at [Www.retrouvaille.org](http://www.retrouvaille.org)

which will give you info that could be passed on to your readers as a resource for troubled couples who come looking for help.

Peace and Blessings,

Bob McKeon

QUOTABLE

When we are really honest with ourselves we must admit that our lives are all that really belong to us. So it is how we use our lives that determines what kind of [people] we are. It is my deepest belief that only by giving our lives do we find life. I am convinced that the truest act of courage is to sacrifice ourselves for others in totally nonviolent struggle for justice. To be [human] is to suffer for others. God help us!

----Cesar Chavez, quoted in CELEBRATION: AN ECUMENICAL WORSHIP SERVICE, October 2000, page 441.

JUSTICE NOTES

The following THREE principles highlight major themes from Catholic social teaching documents of the last century. (Next week we'll have some more.)

1. Dignity of the Human Person

Belief in the inherent dignity of the human person is the foundation of all Catholic social teaching. Human life is sacred, and the dignity of the human person is the starting point for a moral vision for society. This principle is grounded in the idea that the person is made in the image of God. The person is the clearest reflection of God among us.

2. Common Good and Community

The human person is both sacred and social. We realize our dignity and rights in relationship with others, in community. Human beings grow and achieve fulfillment in community. Human dignity can only be realized and protected in the context of relationships with the wider society.

How we organize our society -- in economics and politics, in law and policy -- directly affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community. The obligation to "love our neighbor" has an individual dimension, but it also requires a broader social commitment. Everyone has a responsibility to contribute to the good of the whole society, to the common good. See selected quotations.

3. Option for the Poor

The moral test of a society is how it treats its most vulnerable members. The poor have the most urgent moral claim on the conscience of the nation. We are called to look at public policy decisions in terms of how they affect the poor. The "option for the poor," is not an adversarial slogan that pits one group or class against another. Rather it states that the deprivation and powerlessness of the poor wounds the whole community.

The option for the poor is an essential part of society's effort to achieve the common good. A healthy community can be achieved only if its members give special attention to those with special needs, to those who are poor and on the margins of society. See selected quotations.

4. Rights and Responsibilities

Human dignity can be protected, and a healthy community can be achieved only if human rights are protected and responsibilities are met. Every person has a fundamental right to life and a right to those things required for human decency – starting with food, shelter and clothing, employment, health care, and education. Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities -- to one another, to our families, and to the larger society.

-----from the Office for Social Justice, Archdiocese of Minneapolis

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- Danny Frogg #0137368 (On death row since 3/27/98)
- Allen Holman #0587681 (4/7/98)
- Clinton Smith #0507433 (4/13/98)
- Timmy Grooms #0158506 (4/24/98)

-----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

Jude Siciliano, OP

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