

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 9TH. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B)

Deuteronomy 5: 12-15 Psalm 81 2 Corinthians 4: 6-11 Mark 2: 23-3:6

Dear Preachers:

While on the road for a recent round of preaching, I came across a good book, *URGINGS OF THE HEART: SPIRITUALITY OF INTEGRATION*, by Wilkie Au and Noreen Cannon (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1995). It had a section on the sabbath, and I find it a help for a possible preaching from the first reading. So, excuse the lengthy quote, I think it is worth it:

BEING KEPT BY THE SABBATH

No life should be so busy with work that it excludes time for prayer and friendship, for leisure and solitude, for play and humor. And no work should be so all-consuming that there is no time to take stock of it; no schedule so tight that there is no room to reflect on whether what is being done is worth the doing. Hence the importance of honoring the sabbath and fostering a “sabbath-sense” in our lives. The sabbath, according to scholars of the Talmud, is greatly emphasized in Genesis to show that God created rest and commanded it of us. The sabbath-rest, the rabbis insisted, was vital to creation for three reasons. First, it equalized the rich and the poor, since on at least one day of the week, rich and poor were equally free from the constraints of work. Second, the sabbath provided time to evaluate our work—as Yahweh had evaluated the work of creation—to determine whether our work, like God’s, was good. And, finally, the purpose of the sabbath, the rabbis declared, was to give us time to contemplate the meaning of life. For all three purposes, observing the sabbath is critically important today, especially in light of the dangers of overwork and work addiction....

The sabbath is more richly understood, not as a date, but as an atmosphere. The sixteenth century Jewish rabbis known as the Safed Kabbalists used to speak about receiving the “sabbath-soul.” On the sabbath, a different spirit holds sway than on the other days of the week. There is a different climate and mood. The ancient rabbis stated that as the Jew enters into the sabbath, the sabbath enters into the Jew. So important to the vitality of life was the sabbath that this was said of it: “More than the Jews kept the sabbath, the sabbath kept them.” Strong is the temptation today to lose ourselves in work in order to buttress a shaky self-esteem, to escape lonely and painful reality

and to seek happiness in the glow that comes with a spending spree or an adrenaline high stoked by fast-paced action. Perhaps more than our predecessors on this planet, we badly need the sabbath to keep us. (Page 112)

The question of sabbath observance enters today's Gospel. More and more this will be an area of conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders. Each time their differences erupt into open conflict, it is Jesus who has the upper hand and who silences his opponents, as he does today. Jesus is perceived as challenging the authority of the Pharisees and other high-placed religious officials. The overall effect of these conflictual episodes will be that his opponents will call for his death. They will have to; he is too much of a threat to their established positions. Each of the gospels shows that Jesus has authority over the sabbath, as we hear in today's passage, "that is why the Son of Man is Lord even of the sabbath."

The laws, as promulgated by the experts, were oppressive. These experts, in a desire to scrupulously observe the Torah, had devised 613 commandments. The whole Jewish community was, in their view, obliged to keep these laws. Can you see how oppressive this was? How could you keep these laws if you couldn't read? The overwhelming majority (95% or higher) of the people were poor and illiterate. In the view of the religious elite, this did not dispense anyone from observance of each of these 613 laws. So, the literate, presumably the upper class, would have access to the religious regulations, while all the rest would, because of their ignorance, be constantly breaking the laws. The entitled could look down their religious noses at all the "sinners" around them. Jesus saw this exclusion and the distance it seemed to put between God and the people, and he confronted it constantly. Today's Gospel shows one of his fundamental teachings; the compassionate interpretation of the Law, "The sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the sabbath."

The command to "keep holy" the sabbath is an attempt to put some balance in people's lives. We are more than workers, more than what we do, how much we earn and how profitable our lives appear. The people of Israel were freed from slavery, not because of any work they did or any merit they accrued, but by the gracious hand of God. In Deuteronomy, Moses tells the now-freed Israelites that they are to acknowledge the God who set them free from their Egyptian slave holders. Even the aliens and slaves in their land, as well as their animals, were to be given rest. All would share in remembering the gracious deeds of God by

observing the sabbath and this observance would be passed on to their descendants. Jesus is trying to restore the true spirit of the sabbath in today's story, to remind his listeners that it is a day of celebration and gratitude for all that God has done for them.

I am conscious in this reflection of treading ever so carefully between the need for church laws as guidelines drawn from the cumulative wisdom of the community's response to the Gospel, and the all-too-human tendency for religious laws to become ends in themselves. When the latter happens, mere fulfillment of the law becomes the determination and sign of a righteous life. We have already been warned in Mark's gospel that the bridegroom's presence has introduced a decisive and celebratory moment into our lives. New wine is being poured and it requires new wineskins. The old and rigid forms have no ability to breath and stretch in response to the new thing God is doing in Jesus. In today's account, Jesus's authority to do and say what he does is clearly underlined by his curing, in the synagogue, the man's withered hand. It is another sabbath work that proclaims something new is happening here, God is breaking into our seeming-fixed and immovable lives with a new law that brings life.

It is possible for religion to help us all "play it safe." We feel comfort in knowing we are keeping the rules. We feel entitled before God; if we fulfill the observances then we are due an appropriate reward. In this view of religion, God is subject to us, to our performance. Knowing the commands and extra fine legal niceties also puts us on a superior plain to others. We can judge them by whether or not they are doing everything exactly as the law requires. If not, they are out; and we are in. But last week we saw the roof of a building demolished so that a paralyzed person could get into Christ's presence to be forgiven and healed. Rigid structures get split apart when those who need God are incapable or obstructed from getting close. When the rich young man asked what he must do to receive eternal life, Jesus told him to sell what he had and follow Jesus. He would have to put aside his sureties and get involved with the person of Jesus—a risky and unsure future awaited him. But life was also waiting for him. While we have and accept religious rules and norms to guide us, it is not they that guarantee us life. Only faith in Jesus does that. This faith may not give us the detailed surety the Pharisees wanted about what to do and not do each day, but it does promise us a life that no observance of rules can.

Included in today's sabbath-rest teaching is the reminder that all time and every

time, is an appropriate time for doing good. There is a portrait of God behind today's story. It shows that God does not rest from doing good for us----any day, any time. In response, membership in God's reign stimulates the disciple to be an initiator, a worker for the good of others, so as to reflect the living presence of the God-of-the-sabbath in our midst. With Jesus, God's reign has invaded our life, it breaks through any human attempts to limit it or box it in.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

John F. Kavanaugh, *THE WORD ENCOUNTERED: MEDITATIONS ON THE SUNDAY SCRIPTURES*. New York: Orbis Books, 1996. Paper, 130 pages, Brief reflections on the Sunday readings from the B-cycle. Kavanaugh has a poetic spirit, a knowledge of literature and a passion for justice that makes these reflections good meditations and helpful in the preaching preparation.

QUOTABLE:

Rather than entertain the image of the Pharisee as a curiosity from the distant past, perhaps we should ask whether we contemporary Christians face our own forms of pharisaism. Do we clerics sometimes mistake our roles? Is it priestcraft we practice, or ministry and service? Is it shepherding the flock or feathering our nests that we are about? Are we the indispensable ones in this thing called faith, or is it Someone other we can only point to?

Perhaps all Christians at some time or another fall into the trap of believing that our community, our laws, our traditions, our structures, even our sacraments are more important than the Incarnation itself. The signs of our redemption can loom larger than the actual victory Christ has won for us.

----page 33, *THE WORD ENCOUNTERED: MEDITATIONS ON THE SUNDAY SCRIPTURES*.

READERS' FEEDBACK

From Michael Moynihan----

I wish I had been quick enough to send you the following poem for the reflections on Mark's story of the paralytic..... It is called "The Risk", by Marcella Marie Holloway and is part of an anthology entitled "Divine Inspiration: The Life of Jesus in World Poetry" (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

You take a risk when you invite the Lord
Whether to dine or talk the afternoon
Away, for always the unexpected soon
Turns up: a woman breaks her precious nard,

A sinner does the task you should assume,
A leper who is cleansed must show his proof:
Suddenly you see your very roof removed
And a cripple clutters up your living room.

There's no telling what to expect when Christ
Walks in your door. The table set for four
Must often be enlarged and decorum
Thrown to the wind. It's His voice that calls them
And it's no use to bolt and bar the door:
His kingdom knows no bounds of roof, or wall, or floor.

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,
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