

FIRST IMPRESSIONS FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT -C-
Joshua 5: 9a, 10-12 Psalm 34 2 Corinthians 5: 17-21 Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

If you like happy, resolved endings to stories then today's parable of the Prodigal Son is going to leave you feeling ambiguous. We know the story well, perhaps too well. It can seem "old hat" to us---deja vu. What can be new in it, we wonder. The parable is found only in Luke and who among us churchgoers couldn't repeat the story line by heart? In fact, even those outside our church walls know something about the story. The expressions "prodigal son" and "prodigal daughter" are part of our common parlance. People say, "The prodigal has returned," it is an expression that slips easily off the tongue of people who never enter a church or read the scriptures. Is there a museum any of us has visited that does not have, in traditional or modern form, at least one depiction of the father welcoming his young, errant son home? Yes, some details from the Prodigal Son have entered the lexicon of our popular language and imagination.

But doesn't the story leave you at least a little frustrated or curious? How does the story really end? Does the younger son stay around after the welcome-home party? Has his heart really changed because of his experience, or has he come home just for the room and board? Does he buckle down and join his diligent older brother in the daily and arduous tasks on the farm? Or, does he once again approach his all-too-generous father, ask for some more cash and take off for another dissolute fling? In other words, has he had a change of heart and will his future actions reveal that change?

What about the older brother, that diligent, constant, responsible and hard-working sibling? Does his father's pleading soften his heart and stir him to join the celebration inside? Will he let bygones be bygones, greet and hug his younger brother and welcome him home? Or, will he turn away in disgust from his father, whom he has so faithfully served for years and continue to live his life in servitude all the while resenting his younger brother?

We just don't know the answers to these questions. We think we know what we would do. But who among us hasn't fallen back into old patterns after making

amends for the past and having resolved to change? Can we truly say we have allowed the experience of God's forgiveness to settle into and change our hearts? Our gospel story is open-ended, isn't it? As far as our parable goes, the father has reached out in love to both brothers, according to their needs and now each will have to decide what happens next. If their hearts were truly touched, we would expect to see changes in their behavior.

Certainly the father has done all that he can do. He is not lacking in compassion, sacrifice, humility, forgiveness and acceptance towards both his sons. The issue is whether or not the father's words and actions have penetrated the hearts of the sons. Do they realize who this father is to them? He is not a father in name only. He has "gone out" to meet with both sons: to the first, to greet and embrace him on the road; to the second, to plead with him to open his heart to his brother and to "celebrate and rejoice" with everyone at his brother's return. If the sons let the father into their hearts they will be changed. Both will realize that he loved each of them in different ways and for different reasons. Why would the younger son ever want to run away again from such love, especially after the unearned forgiveness he has received? Why would the older son continue to resent what his brother received, when he himself has experienced acceptance and understanding from his father? The father doesn't want the older boy to feel duty bound like a servant; but to accept what his father tells him, "My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours." The father has given all of himself to both sons. Will they, in turn, appreciate and be changed by the total gift they have received, despite their own shortcomings?

Today's gospel account opened with criticism leveled at Jesus by the Pharisees and scribes. They are resentful because, "tax collectors and sinners are drawing near to Jesus to listen to him...." Jesus' parable confronts their hard heartedness; they have been diligent keepers of the law and the customs. Like the older son, they certainly deserve praise and appreciation for their fidelity. But they sense that Jesus, like the father in the parable, is profligate in his acceptance of those who, like the younger son, have not kept the law and yet are rushing "home" to find forgiveness and welcome from Jesus. The older son has never left his father's side, yet he does not know him. The Pharisees and scribes have stayed close to the law and religious customs, yet they have failed to appreciate the God they have been diligently trying to serve in their slavish observances.

The parable reminds us that there is a part of each brother in us. Most of us have done our best over the years to faithfully serve God. We try to keep the rules and guidelines of our faith. But, like the older son, we can miss the God we claim to be serving. The parable underlines the importance of getting to know the God in whom we profess faith, who is a welcoming and forgiving parent delighted by our service and welcoming when we stray and seek to come home. When we do decide to return what shall we show to God to “prove” our sorrow and desire to change? Nothing can earn the forgiveness we receive, we shall just have to let it sink in and soften our hearts so that when others come seeking our forgiveness we will mirror the God who came out to meet us on the road and who is so happy to see us. Like the younger son, we can’t even get a chance to finish our prepared speech. Instead, we are embraced and treated like returning royalty clothed in the finest robe, rings and kisses.

Once we have let the reality of God’s forgiveness towards us sink in and change our hearts, then we are ready to hear what Paul tells us. Today’s gospel and the whole of the gospel itself, is a tale of reconciliation. In 2 Corinthians, Paul reminds us that God reached out to us through Christ to reconcile us to God and one another. Had both brothers in the parable been receptive to their father’s offer of reconciliation, their hearts would have been transformed. Then, if the story had continued, the younger son would have been described as gratefully accepting his father’s forgiveness by not returning to his old ways. He would have entered the household, where he would have experienced love and new life. The second son would have responded to his father’s urging and been reconciled to both his brother and his father.

Paul reminds us that through God’s initiative in Christ, we have been reconciled to God. We have been welcomed into the household of God’s love to “celebrate and rejoice.” We don’t know how the two brothers did respond, but we do know what we can do. In our baptism we live a new life---a reconciled life-- and with that new identity and energy we, as Paul tells us, are to be “ambassadors of Christ.” The message of reconciliation lives in us and our lives must reflect that to the world.

What we do and say should show to others what God has done for us in Christ. Our lives must reflect our new identity as we live out our roles as ambassadors of Christ. Ambassadors speak and act on behalf of their countries. They are commissioned to be representatives of their nations and their leaders to others. Our

world is in terrible need of ambassadors, sent from a God who wishes to reconcile people to one another. Paul tells us that we are these ambassadors, signs of what God has accomplished in Christ.

Many parishes will have penance services this Lent which will include the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In the light of today's scriptures, the preacher may find it appropriate to invite people, as part of their lenten practice, to the sacrament. In Catholic liturgical practice, the formula for absolutions isn't a prayer to God on behalf of the penitent. Instead, the priest speaks on God's behalf, "I absolve you from your sins." That's a rather bold statement. But it gives testimony to what the scriptures tell us about God's mercy. The minister of the sacrament speaks what the community believes and practices. Our community itself is an ambassador of reconciliation and speaks with assurance on behalf of the God we have come to know through parables like today's and in our own personal lives.

We need to finish the story of the Prodigal Son in our own lives. The Pharisees and scribes accuse Jesus, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." At this Eucharist Jesus continues to reconcile us sinners to God. He welcomes us and gives us himself as our food. We, in turn, are sent into the world to be ambassadors of the reconciliation we have received and experienced anew around the tables of the Word and Sacrament today.

QUOTABLE

Are we to dispel this ignorance of the scriptures by school or sermon, class or Mass? Both, of course. But don't confuse the two. If we understood the power of the Word studied, proclaimed, and believed, we would not be running to new schemas to "cover Catholic doctrine," giving a "homily" on sacramentals or Catholic burial practices, giving up on the advances in understanding the scripture that have been made in the past thirty years.

-----Joseph T. Nolan in, *The World, The Church and Preaching: The Best of Good News Commentary*. New Berlin, Wisconsin: Liturgical Publications Inc, 1996, (Page 101).

JUSTICE NOTES

Our Lent should awaken a sense of social justice.

----Oscar Romero, THE VIOLENCE OF LOVE, quoted in "The Living Pulpit--Lent," January-March, page 32.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

"It is time to abandon the death penalty -- not just because of what it does to those who are executed, but because of how it diminishes all of us... We ask all Catholics--pastors, catechists, educators and parishioners -- to join us in rethinking this difficult issue and committing ourselves to pursuing justice without vengeance. With our Holy Father, we seek to build a society so committed to human life that it will not sanction the killing of any human person.

-----("Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice," U.S. Catholic Bishops, Nov. 2000,)

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:.....

Angel Guevara #0506556 (On death row since 6/20/96)

David K. Williams #0440399 (7/23/98)

Walic C. Thomas #0405380 (8/9/96)

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

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. Two new CDs Available:

"First Impressions Preaching Reflections: Liturgical Year C." Begins in Advent and contains **three** reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of the year. It also has book reviews and additional essays related to preaching.

"Liturgical Years A, B and C." Reflections on the three-year cycle, with Year C updated.

If you are a preacher, lead a Lectionary-based scripture group, or are a member of a liturgical team, these CDs will be helpful in your preparation process. Individual worshipers report they also use these reflections as they prepare for Sunday liturgy.

You can order the CDs by going to our webpage: www.preacherexchange.com and clicking on the “First Impressions” CD link on the left.

2. **“Homilias Dominicales”** —These Spanish reflections on the Sunday and daily scriptures are written by Dominican sisters and friars. If you or a friend would like to receive these reflections drop a note to fr. John Boll, O.P. at Jboll@opsouth.org Or jboll@preacherexchange.org

3. Our webpage: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>
Where you will find “Preachers’ Exchange,” which includes “First Impressions” and “Homilias Dominicales,” as well as articles, book reviews, daily homilies and other material pertinent to preaching.

4. “First Impressions” is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Dominican Friars of Raleigh, N.C. If you would like “First Impressions” sent weekly to a friend, send a note to fr. John Boll, OP at the above email address.

DONATIONS

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below.

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Thanks you and blessings on your preaching,
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