

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 4th 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:

We certainly are familiar with today's gospel story. We have called it “the Prodigal Son.” Some commentators have suggested it be named, “The Prodigal Father” –after the true spendthrift in the story. Others have suggested that the title shouldn't focus the story or slant it towards one or another character, so they suggest it be titled “A Father and Two Sons.” Nevertheless, however we choose to name it, this parable is very familiar to churchgoers and bible readers. We can almost repeat it by heart.

From its opening line the action starts immediately: the younger son makes his brash request asking for “the share of your estate that should come to me.” Imagine asking a parent for the inheritance you are to get when he or she dies! The son is treating the father as if he were dead, what a callous request. Most parents would take exception to the child rearing methods of this father. And they would be right! But this is not a parable on how to raise children. It has to do with how things work between God and us.

We know the rest of the story. I find it interesting to track it by the verbs: collected, set off, squandered, spent everything, hired himself, tend the swine, longed to eat, coming to his senses, he thought, got up, went back. The action, both the decline and return, is quick and to the point. The son's fall and subsequent recovery happen decisively. Once he realizes his hopeless situation (“coming to his senses”), he seizes the chance to get help. Lent is supposed to be a time when we “come to our senses,” realizing that what we have been doing is unproductive and unsatisfying, producing emptiness in our lives and a yearning for God. We “come to our senses,” and decide we have to change. Like the son we are invited to do something quickly, without fearing the reception we will get when we turn back. The parable stirs up a confidence in what we will find when we return, “I know I will be well received” we can say with confidence because of this parable. The psalm response urges us on, “Taste and see the goodness of our God.” Turning back to God provides a chance to experience just how good God is, a real spendthrift with mercy! The son has confidence in being able to return,

he just hadn't expected the extra special treatment he got.

The parable is trying to instigate confidence in anyone who hears it: we might feel hesitate about turning back to God, especially if we feel we have done this too many times in the past. We might even suspect the "purity" of our motives, the sincerity of our desire to return. Considering the son's less than noble reasons for his going to his father---- his belly was empty and he remembered that even his father's workers had "more than enough to eat"—we need fear no test of our own motives. Just head back home, the parable urges, God will rush out to make the return easy. In fact, when dealing with the divine, even the instinct to turn around and go home, is a gift of God. Similarly, the parable hints that there is something of the father at work on the son as the boy considers his plight for he recalls the father's generosity even to hired workers. I doubt that could be said about other farm owners and their employees at the time. Can that even be said now? "More than enough to eat"? The memory of the generous father is the grace that stirs the boy to pack up and head for home. When the father and son meet the atmosphere of the father's love and acceptance make confession of guilt easy.

Whenever we turn back to God, the parable urges us to trust in a warm welcome. The story can be painted in other ways. I think of a big hearted grandmother you go to in order to apologize for breaking her favorite baking dish and she just shushes you up and says, "Forget about it—how about some tea and cookies? I just baked them."

Would that the story ended here, at the embrace between father and son and the verse, "Then the celebration began." But there is a second half, a darker side to the story. Jesus seems to be pointing this part of the story to the Pharisees and scribes who were complaining about Jesus' welcome of sinners. Jesus was making it much too easy, in their estimation, for people who hadn't worked as hard at their religion as the observant Pharisees and scribes. In Jesus' preaching it is clear that he envisions God's throwing a party, flinging open the doors to anyone who wants to turn a repentant eye in God's direction. Instead of the religious leaders joining the festive parade into the feast, they put up protest and stamp their feet in disapproval: God isn't playing by the rules they had established and scrupulously observed.

From outside the house comes the elder son. He is the hard working responsible

one. Any parent would have been proud of such a child. Unlike his younger brother, he learned well the lessons his parents must have taught him about hard work and living up to expectations. But what he didn't inherit from his father (and maybe his mother too!) was his large, forgiving and celebratory heart. Despite the son's recalcitrance, the father doesn't give up on him, just as he didn't give up on his brother. The father makes a second trip outside the house and goes looking for another wayward son. This one wants to be disconnected from what he has perceived in his brother and what he has learned about his father. How embarrassed the responsible son would have been when the neighbors and town folk hear about the "foolish father who wouldn't stay home"—another name for the parable?

We may have both siblings in us. How many times have we merrily and immaturely set out on our own, fallen on our face and been grateful and surprised when we came to our senses and returned to a waiting and patient God? We have the other side in us too: we are not the greatest sinners in the world. We probably are pretty observant folk, when it comes to religious and civil rules. We may have even contributed to the latest expansion of our parish church and supported our favorite educational and charitable outreach programs. However there is always the danger of feeling more an obligation to do the good things we are doing and less a sense of celebration and gratitude for the God who has been so generous to us. We can feel like the elder son who has "served...all these years." I wouldn't want a child feeling just this sense of duty and obligation to me. There is no real loving relationship of child to parent suggested in the way the elder son speaks of his time of service to his father. Turns out that both brothers have to "come to their senses." For one reason or another, both needed to come from outside and return to the father's house.

The parable evokes a sense of trust as we turn away from our own meanderings and turn back to God this Lent. The grace of the parable encourages us to expect our God to behave like a parent who has longed to see us and has waited expectantly for us. The parable also touches the older child in us, urging us to rejoice in any brother or sister returning to their senses. We will want to be with those we know who are struggling to get free of addictive behavior or substances. Those who want to come "home" to their true or better selves. We will want to support teenagers who have left their homes either physically or have checked out emotionally. What do they need from us at this point in their lives? We will want

to be less judgmental against those who have had to flee their lands because war, economics or nature have deprived them of food for themselves and their families. We need to put aside the elder son's judgmental attitude against those who come looking for food or work.

The elder son may be justified in his distress and anger. After all, his father has acted in a very unpredictable way and shaken the foundation on which the son has stood. If this father, to whom he has been so subservient, has thrown all standards and expected ways of behaving up in the air by his flamboyant acceptance of his wayward son, then how can the elder brother rely on this father for his security? The father is unpredictable. Who knows what the old man will do next? So now both sons are going to have to live in trust: that generous forgiveness is always there for them. No matter how foolishly they act, they can expect their father to outdo himself in forgiveness and welcome. When need arises, this father will be there for them, no matter how foolish he may appear to onlookers.

QUOTABLE

A lively and inquiring theology of today is working to make tomorrow's preaching reach mind and heart. This work of theology's may often look inconsequential and fruitless. But it is necessary. Even though heart and grace are the only things which we cannot do without.

-----Karl Rahner

JUSTICE NOTES

(These weekly quotes may be helpful in your preaching or may also be added to your weekly parish bulletin as a way of informing your faith community on some social issues.)

When considering economic, social and environmental policies on behalf of agriculture and rural communities, The National Catholic Rural Life Conference considers the following as one of its principles:

INTEGRITY OF CREATION

As Catholics we believe that the earth belongs to the Lord. If this is true, then creation has an integrity and an inherent value beyond its utility or usefulness for human beings. Human beings are meant to be responsible stewards of creation, and indeed we can say that we work in harmony with God as co-creators. Just as

God is One, the web of life is one and we are its caring stewards.

How we live on God's land cannot be disconnected to how we live in community as social beings. If we are to sustain ourselves in authentic community, we must maintain a healthy environment, we must develop a beneficial economy, and we must build a just society. When we say "support the family farm", we are saying that the best proprietors of a farm is the family. Here nature and human life can live integrally and share the abundance of creation with the entire human family.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

"Can you imagine what it's like to have your boy on death row? Can you imagine what it's like to visit him there every Saturday and tell him, 'I love you. I'll see you next week,' when you never know if they're going to call and say, 'He's up next—it's time for his execution.'"

---Jeanetter Johnson, Mother of Alan Gell, who is being retried because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree murder. [The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

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:.....

Steven V. Mc Hone #0270047 (on death row since 3/7/91)

Elias H. Syriani #0398002 (6/13/91)

Renwick Gibbs #0144649 (11/14/91)

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

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: "FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR C" This compilation, from past "First Impressions," includes two reflections on almost all Sundays and major feasts for this liturgical year. For more information and to purchase go to: <http://judeop.ispraleigh.com/>

2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use “First Impressions” in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)

3. Our webpage address: <http://judeop.ispraleigh.com/>
(Where you will find “Preachers’ Exchange,” which includes "First Impressions" and “Homilias Dominicales,” as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)

4. “Homilias Dominicales”-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Leobardo Almazan, OP , Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like “First Impressions”, “Homilias Dominicales” are a preacher’s early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive “Homilias Dominicales” drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: Jboll@opsouth.org or jboll@preacherexchange.org

5. "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, send a note to John Boll 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. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://judeop.ispraleigh.com>

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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