

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 6th SUNDAY OF EASTER, -C-
Acts 15:1-2, 22-29 Psalm 67 Revelation 21: 10-14, 22-23 John 14: 23-29
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

“The reading of the will.” Boy, that announcement and event stir up a lot of feelings in families! When a family is close, siblings look out for each other. Parents might gather children and explain what they are putting in their will and even explain why. In such families a sister might say, “Both my husband and I have good jobs, we are doing well. Give part or all of my share to my brother Bill, he is unable to work because he cares for his invalid wife.” When families are not close, or when they have been taught by their parents to put material things at the top of their list of what’s important, then the reading can be fraught with tension and greed. Accusations might follow, “How come he got...?” “Why didn’t I get more?” “She didn’t love mom and dad as much as I did!” etc.

Jesus and his disciples at the last Supper are in a unique situation. The end is coming for Jesus and he knows it and his disciples sense it. So, while he is still alive, Jesus “reads” his last will and testament. What will he leave to keep the nascent community from splintering apart from fear or bickering after he is gone? What can he give them to make their lives as his disciples possible once he is gone? How will he distribute his “wealth”—will some get more, others less? Who will be favored; who put aside? What can he possibly leave them to make sure he is more than a lovely memory for a generation or two of his successors? His solution, of course, is that he leaves himself to them in his Spirit.

Today’s gospel selection reminds us of our inheritance and the Acts’ reading shows the treasure for the church that the Spirit is. The legacy is not something material that in a few generations will get spent, squandered or worn out. Rather, the Spirit stays fresh and vibrant for us. Jesus calls the Spirit the “Advocate.” The word’s origin refers to a person we might call to our side to defend us in court, one whom we trust to stand by us in difficult situations and give us strength when life tests us. In other words, the Advocate is our ally, who has our best interests at heart.

Jesus says, “Whoever loves me will keep my word....” The love he means is not

an emotional high that can pass away under stress or with time. Rather, this love is a strong determination to take Jesus' teaching to heart and to live by them. Keeping the words Jesus taught is a sign of our love for him. But disciples cannot live the life Jesus has called us to on our own. We have heard the gospel and sense what he expects of us. Try forgiving an enemy...turning the other cheek...feeding the hungry...confronting little and big injustices, etc., not just once, but over and over. Can't be done----not on our own that is. So, as he voices his last will and testament, Jesus is making sure he leaves us what we need to fulfill his teachings and experience his new life deep within ourselves and in the community. Jesus has looked ahead to our well being and made sure we will always have what it takes to be a Christian community in an ever-changing world.

In this reading, notice the work the Spirit will do: as Advocate, the Spirit will be to the church what Jesus was to his disciples. God will send the Spirit; so we don't have to perform superhuman tasks to receive it. The Spirit will come, Jesus tells us, "in my name;" so we will be connected to Jesus; the Spirit will "teach you everything and remind you," a comfort to disciples who tend to forget what Jesus taught and who need help applying his words to new life situations.

While each of the baptized is gifted with the Spirit, there is a strong emphasis in the readings on the presence of the Spirit in the community. Preachers need to help believers see that "me and Jesus" is not an adequate spirituality; our faith is communally based and it is the Spirit that feeds and guides the community. Thus, we in the first reading the community acts "with one accord" to settle disputes between Jewish Christians and more recent gentile converts. With the early church's growth, especially through Paul and Barnabas' preaching, many gentiles became converts. Some, called Judaizers, wanted these converts to observe certain Mosaic practices. The believers called a church council in Jerusalem to address the issue and we hear of their decision in the Acts' reading. What is striking is their unanimity and the boldness with which they speak, "It is the decision of the Holy Spirit and us...." The gift of the Spirit gives this community empowerment and direction. The community's leaders come to a decision so as not to "disturb your peace of mind." The church was in need and the leadership met and responded appropriately.

Immediately after Jesus promises his disciples the Spirit, he says that he is leaving them peace. The early church is to be a Spirit-animated community working to

heal divisions and settle disagreements among its members and to continue Jesus' work of peace making in the world. If the very community members that profess faith in the Prince of Peace are not reconciled to one another, what good would it do to go out to the world with Christ's message of peace? The Spirit's coming will have to bring transformation and help Jesus' gift of peace to grow within the community. There was much to unsettle and divide the early church from within its own membership. From the Acts reading we are reminded that the believers were diverse and certainly had differences of opinion. But under the Spirit's impulse and their faithful response, different people's came together.

There are many differences in both our worldwide and local church. But such diversity should not rupture our community. The preacher might want to name the diversity in the local congregation and invite worshipers to celebrate the unity our faith gives us. And, in anticipation of Pentecost, our parish community might begin prayers for unity to help heal the disunity and hurts from the past. The Spirit is apostolic; when we received the Spirit we receive a mission as well. The peace we have been given, we are sent to bring to the world and this peacemaking begins among those closest to us, in our own church household.

Earlier in Acts, Luke described the "coming" of the Spirit upon the gathered community. But that dramatic impulse on Pentecost does not mean the Spirit is only a periodic occurrence, leaving us alone most of the time. Rather, the Spirit remains always working with us to keep Christ alive in our midst and urges us to bring his gifts to the world. The Spirit is with us now, as Jesus was with his disciples in his lifetime. When Jesus offers peace to his disciples he reminds them that he will return to them--- and he has, in his Spirit.

If the gospels have taught us anything they have assured us that the Spirit will be with us, helping us continue Jesus work in our own time. In Acts, Luke does what all the gospel writers do. The gospels were written after Pentecost and so each had Pentecost in mind. They describe Jesus' life and ministry in ways that help later believers see what preaching the reign of God could look like—healing the sick, forgiving sinners, being peacemakers, teaching God's ways, etc. Now, under the influence of the same Spirit that animated Jesus and his ministry, we are being sent out to do the same works Jesus did. The Spirit is ready and willing to help us do just that. So, we pray today and during the coming weeks, "Come Holy Spirit."

QUOTABLE

The Spirit appears as resistance, rising above all hatred, hoping against all hope. The Spirit is that little flicker of fire burning at the bottom of the woodpile. More rubbish is piled on, rains put out the flame, wind blows the smoke away. But underneath everything a brand still burns on, unquenchable.... The Spirit sustains the feeble breath of life in the empire of death.

-----Leonardo Boff, *THE TRINITY AND SOCIETY*, 1988, quoted in "The Living Pulpit," April-June, 2004, page 40.

JUSTICE NOTES

Preachers who take seriously the challenge of the widening economic gap and its consequent tearing in two of America's social and communal fabric know that they are up against enormous forces that will not be happy with their "meddling" in peoples' financial affairs. But it is hard to dispute the charge that capitalism has become the oversized tail that is wagging the dog of democracy. Capitalism without a conscience operates in a "grab-and-get" mode and uses the power of its resources to leverage the democratic system, not for the greater benefit of the greatest numbers of members within its constituency, but for the greater benefit of the few whose main goal is to continue to maximize profit and return. Capitalism without a conscience manipulates democracy to its own ends of acquisition.

----Andre Resner, Jr. *JUST PREACHING: PROPHETIC VOICES FOR ECONOMIC JUSTICE*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003, (ISBN 0-8272-1715-3 paper), page 167.

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.'"

----Jeanette Johnson, Mother of Alan Gell, who was retried and found innocent 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:.....

William Powell #0329098 (On death row since 4/30/93)

Gregory Warren #0156518 (5/18/93)

David Lynch #0251740 (5/27/93)

-----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, Juan Torres, 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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