

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 15th SUNDAY -C- JULY 11, 2004

Deuteronomy 30: 10-14 Psalm 69 Colossians 1: 15-20 Luke 10: 25-37

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

I write these reflections on the Good Samaritan while traveling—and waiting! My first flight is three hours late departing! I got the news at the check-in counter. I wish the airline had called to let me know I have more comfortable accommodations at home where I would much prefer to spend the time. Had I known I would have had a leisurely hot breakfast and read the morning newspaper—who knows, I might even have found a useable and modern Good Samaritan story in the papers to use for this reflection. Instead, I am stuck in an airport lounge, sitting on an uncomfortable plastic chair writing this on my lap. I was a bit annoyed at the ticket counter, but tried to be nice to the affable agent, after all, it wasn't her fault. But the parable of the Good Samaritan is more than about inconvenient moments; it has nothing to do with being “nice”—and everything to do with who we are as we travel and what we do along the road. It is a traveler's tale, and we are all travelers. The parable reminds us that how we act towards others as we travel life's journey together is core to our faith.

“Good Samaritan”—the title has been canonized. Someone is called a good Samaritan, and we immediately know this person is merciful to strangers in need, even at personal costs to him or herself. But of course, for the Jews, Samaritans were not known as people who do good, but as the hated enemies of the Jewish people. And the feelings were mutual. There were generations of animosity behind this story, and Jesus' Jewish hearers would need no one to explain the implications of the parable. For them this parable was not the charming story passed down lovingly through the generations for believers as it is for us. Instead, it was a shocker that threw the hearers back on themselves and questioned their presumptions; or at least it should have.

The lawyer wants to know “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He doesn't want some distant eternal bliss but is asking about having a good relationship with God now, one that not even death will destroy. We notice the response he gets doesn't focus on loving God, any pious Jew would know what that love involved. And of course, the answer about loving neighbor was also known (Deut 6: 4ff. and Lev. 19:18). The issue and point of the parable is “who is my neighbor?”—that is the question for us too, isn't it?

Today's gospel occurs in the section of Luke's gospel called “the journey narrative” (9:51-19:27). This narrative began when Jesus made a significant change as he, “set his face to go to Jerusalem”(9:51). Luke shows Jesus' awareness and acceptance of his destiny. Previous to

today's section Jesus sent out the seventy-two disciples to preach (10:1). They return elated over their successes (10:17-20). Jesus thanks God for the revelation given to these "little ones," his disciples, (10:21-22), and he blesses them (10:23-24). At this point in the gospel the lawyer comes forth with his question about eternal life and we hear Jesus' response. The encounter with the lawyer and the subsequent parable, are words spoken from the road to travelers, both then and now. As his listeners then and now travel---how will we act towards others we meet along the way?.....whether they be traveling with us or going in opposite directions.

When the lawyer asks, "Who is my neighbor?", he may expect the traditional answer: your neighbor is anyone who is an Israelite brother or sister. Such an answer would have clearly delineated the religious obligations for loving. But Jesus wants us to look to the Samaritan for the answer to the lawyer's question. Whether the injured man would qualify under the rubric of "neighbor" is not the point. Instead, Jesus wants us to do what the Samaritan did; prove ourselves to be neighbor by treating others in need with compassion. The issue is: what kind of person am I?—not what kind of person needs me?

The lawyer wants a detailed definition of who the neighbor is, but instead Jesus says that one must not define the object of love, but the subject: the Samaritan is the subject of love. He is the one who loves, and so must we be. The lawyer's questions, it turns out, was the wrong one to ask. He and maybe we want limits on how far our love must extend. Tell me exactly how, where and whom I must love. But "Love your neighbor," was not supposed to be a teaching that would put limits on our love. The question isn't, "Who is my neighbor?", but "To whom am I a neighbor?" That's what Jesus is saying when he asks, "Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the man who fell in with the robbers?..." go and do the same." "Neighbor" suggests relationship, God has made every person a "neighbor" to us and our response to God is to be a neighbor to each person who has need.

On the road Jesus has much to teach his disciples. One thing he teaches, is his willingness to go to Jerusalem, the place of suffering and death. On the road to Jerusalem, he is showing us that we must be willing to give our lives in service and love. That's what we hear in this parable today. What would a follower of Jesus on "the Way" look like; how would one recognize him or her? The true follower, when coming upon people in need would respond spontaneously without first checking a person's bank account, diplomas, quality of clothing, the school their kids attend, national origins, status of citizenship, etc.

Today we hear the parable of the Good Samaritan in our worship setting. We have taken a break from our usual routines of work, study, play and family to pause and listen. The parable's emphasis is on doing. But as God's word, it also has a formative quality; for those of us who

receive it in faith, it can, like the eucharist itself, bring Christ's presence to shape us into being the very kind of people Jesus holds before us in the person of the Samaritan. As we leave this worship today, we are told by Jesus, "Then go and do the same." For this moment of worship, we ask God to feed us our "daily bread" for the road, where we need help to become the Good Samaritan.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

PARABLES FOR PREACHERS: YEAR C, by Barbara E. Reid. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2000. Paper, 351 pages, \$11.95.

This excellent commentary on the parables is one of a series of three that addresses the parables as they appear in the liturgical year. Written for preachers, the first part discusses the challenge of preaching parables, methods for interpreting them and provides an overview of Luke's gospel—the gospel for this liturgical year. Then each parable is analyzed along with suggestions for how to preach from the parable under study. The reviews of this series have been excellent, and preachers can welcome these commentaries as helps in our preaching ministry.

QUOTABLE

"Good Samaritan" is a phrase that has become ubiquitous for any person who performs an kind act toward another, particularly a stranger. Stories of heroic acts of mercy by which a person even endangers his or her own life to come to the aid of another continue to hold fascination. Why would anyone do such a thing? The gospel parable gives the answer: because this is how God acts. And so one who wants to keep God's Law does the same.

—Reid, page 117.

JUSTICE NOTES

Our nation has been blessed with freedom, democracy, abundant resources, and generous and religious people. However, our prosperity does not reach far enough. Our culture sometimes does not lift us up but brings us down in moral terms. Our world is wounded by terror, torn apart by conflict, and haunted by hunger.

As we approach the elections of 2004, we renew our call for a new kind of politics--focused on moral principles not on the latest polls, on the needs of the poor and vulnerable not the contributions of the rich and powerful, and on the pursuit of the common good not the demands

of special interests.

Faithful citizenship calls Catholics to see civic and political responsibilities through the eyes of faith and to bring our moral convictions to public life. People of good will and sound faith can disagree about specific applications of Catholic principles. However, Catholics in public life have a particular responsibility to bring together consistently their faith, moral principles, and public responsibilities.

At this time, some Catholics may feel politically homeless, sensing that no political party and too few candidates share a consistent concern for human life and dignity. However, this is not a time for retreat or discouragement. We need more, not less engagement in political life. We urge Catholics to become more involved: by running for office; by working within political parties; by contributing money or time to campaigns; and by joining diocesan legislative networks, community organizations, and other efforts to apply Catholic principles in the public square.

-----“Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility”---US Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2003, page .

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 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:.....

- Jeffrey Kandies #0221506 (On death row since 4/20/94)
- Vincent M. Wooten #0453231 (4/29/94)
- John R. Elliott #0120038 (5/4/94)

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