

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 22nd SUNDAY -C-

Sirach 3: 17-18, 20, 28-30 Ps. 68 Hebrews 12: 18-19, 22-24 Luke 14: 1, 7-14

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

If you have been looking for an opportunity to preach about the Eucharist, today's scriptures provide an opportunity. Luke would be my preaching focus for such preaching. Let's back into the gospel with some prenotes.

It is a shame that for many Christians the Eucharist is an event set apart from the rest of the gospel, something set off in Jesus' ministry. But Jesus' words and actions at the Last Supper reflect all he taught and did in his ministry. We tend to isolate the Eucharist in its liturgical setting as well as from the rest of the gospel. For example, I remember as a boy we were instructed that we could still validly attend mass if we got there by the offertory. (Others have told me they were taught that the washing of the hands was the point of demarcation!) What did that say about the importance of the Word of God? And didn't that practice tend to isolate the Eucharist from the gospel message?

A younger generation, since Vatican II, has been taught differently. But it seems to me the old thinking is still around. While we Americans favor promptness in most things, there still is a casual atmosphere about arriving on time for the beginning of Sunday mass to hear the scriptures (families with young children excepted). For many, the Eucharist is the Last Supper, a thing apart from the passion and Jesus' words and deeds.

The early church saw Eucharist as an integral part of the gospel message. But in the middle ages a shift happened when the church became engaged in the controversies over the "real presence." This polemic resulted in an emphasis placed on what Jesus did at the Last Supper and less on what he did and said in his ministry: the focus was on the words of institution (even the word "institution" gives the act a fixed and isolated sound). Biblical writers such as Eugene La Verdiere (see below) teach us that before the gospels were written down they were communicated through the lives of the disciples—their deeds, preaching, healing and reconciling ministries. Biblical teachers remind us that the gospel was communicated in the Eucharist which, as Paul reminds us, "...proclaims the death of the Lord until he comes" (I Cor 11:26).

Luke's gospel has a unique focus on the meaning of the Eucharist. La Verdiere says Luke presents his gospel in a way that makes the Eucharist and Christ's message inseparable. Luke

does this by framing his gospel narrative as a great journey and along the way, meals and hospitality play a critical role for Jesus and his followers. The disciples are people who have received hospitality and reclined at table with Jesus and so they must be like their Master and offer similar hospitality to others, especially the poor and outcast.

Meals in Luke's gospel, whether eaten, or described by Jesus in his teaching, point to the Eucharist and likewise, the Eucharist points back to the gospel events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. This gospel, therefore, narrates the story of Jesus and his followers, men and women all on a journey with him to God. During this journey significant moments of revelation happen both at meals with Jesus and when he talks about meals.

You can see where this reflection is going, can't you? In today's gospel Jesus is invited to the home of a leading Pharisee. While at table he tells a parable about a meal and gives instruction about whom to invite when hosting a dinner. We know that Luke connects meals with the Eucharist, and so Jesus' teachings around a table alert us to what Luke also wants to teach us about Eucharist. Remember last week's gospel passage? It precedes and sets a tone for today's. We were told that when the Lord returns, it is not enough to claim that we ate and drank in his company (13:26). In addition, when he does come, the final banquet will include surprising guests at the table, those who "come from the east and the west and from the north and the south" (13:29). Today we learn more about what God is offering us through Christ and what is expected of those who gather at our Eucharistic table today.

In the Pharisee's home Jesus notices the scramble for prime places at the meal. Sabbath meals were central to Israel's religious practice. The Sabbath had many meanings, a key one was that the people were to observe the Creator's instruction that the day be a day of rest and kept holy. Deuteronomy also teaches that the Sabbath is a day to show concern for those who are suffering. For example, even slaves were to have rest on the Sabbath (5:15). (Yes, like their neighbors, Israel had slaves, but they were to be treated with compassion and so they too were to rest on the Sabbath.) At the meal Jesus shows he is faithful to the Sabbath's true spirit. Christians can be guilty of denigrating Jewish observance of the Sabbath into mere legalism. In truth, all religions have their temptations to legalism. But who among us, for example, wouldn't benefit from some imitation of the Jewish teachings about Sabbath rest? ---- we who are slaves to labor; tempted to idolize money; caught up in frenetic rush towards chaos. Some attempt at rest and religious observance on the Sabbath would do us all some good.

Today at this worship, our Sabbath rest allows us Christians to gather, cease our chatter and listen to what Jesus tells us about our Eucharistic meal and religious observance. What we hear again is that God has turned our values upside down--remember last week's gospel?--the last

shall be first. Those who think they are something and live as if they are above others, like those seeking the first places at table, will learn, to their dismay, that they are nothing. Instead, before God, the insignificant outsiders, despised by society, are “something.” Those at the meal who are set against Jesus, find themselves the recipients of his demanding words. If they wish to live out the God-life Jesus has preached and practiced, they are to behave like God and treat the last as those who are first. So, those listening to Jesus are told they should “invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind” to their table.

That’s what God has done for us at our table today. We are not here because of our social standing or birthright. We are here in honored first places because through Jesus, God has called us up to places of dignity. At this meal we who eat are transformed by Christ’s passion and resurrection. Here we are reminded of our baptismal identity as alive in Christ and partners in his work to transform the world. Do we believe what Jesus said at that Pharisee’s Sabbath table? Do we believe we are the recipients of God’s great mercy? If we do, then after we leave this Eucharist, we should act similarly towards those unable to repay us. As has been done to you; do to others. Gratuitous love is the sign of God’s presence in the world. We are called to be such signs of the love we have received, for Jesus has reminded us at table that it is both the sacred meal and the guest list that matter.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

I am indebted for insights on today’s gospel from the following:

Eugene La Verdere, **DINING IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD: THE ORIGINS OF THE Eucharist ACCORDING TO LUKE.** (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications), 1994. Paper, ISBN 1-5684-022-1

Shows the connections between the Eucharist and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The author helps us see the issues that arise for us when we celebrate the Eucharist.

QUOTABLE

In the Eucharist, Christians dine with Jesus the prophet. And so they must be open to his prophetic challenge and ready to join him in challenging others. Such are the demands of table solidarity. To escape those demands one must withdraw from the table.

The first and most basic challenge is that of conversion (metanoia), a lifetime process for everyone.... Those you dine with Jesus, must be willing to be transformed by his presence. We must become like him as he became like us. No one is excluded from the challenge of metanoia. No one is righteous. All are in need of repentance for the forgiveness of sins....

[Another challenge] involves seeking honor, privilege and personal gain, either as a guest seeking the best place at table, or as the host inviting only those who are apt to bring honor and reward for oneself. It is the challenge of the Sabbath dinner at the house of a leading Pharisee (14:1-24). To dine in the kingdom of God, guests must seek the lowest place, and the host must invite the poor and helpless.

----La Verdiere, page 195-6.

JUSTICE NOTES

A Consistent Moral Framework

The *Word of God and the teachings of the Church* give us a particular way of viewing the world. Scripture calls us to "choose life," to serve "the least of these," to "hunger and thirst" for justice and to be "peacemakers."⁷

Catholic teaching offers consistent moral principles to assess issues, political platforms, and campaigns for their impact on human life and dignity. As Catholics, we are not free to abandon unborn children because they are seen as unwanted or inconvenient; to turn our backs on immigrants because they lack the proper documents; to create and then destroy human lives in a quest for medical advances or profit; to turn away from poor women and children because they lack economic or political power; or to ignore sick people because they have no insurance. Nor can we neglect international responsibilities in the aftermath of war because resources are scarce. Catholic teaching requires us to speak up for the voiceless and to act in accord with universal moral values.

-----"Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility". US Conference of Catholic Bishops.

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:.....

- Darrell C. Woods #0497100 (On death row since 5/22/95)
- Timothy Richardson #0492102 (6/1/95)
- Earl Richmond #0343602 (6/1/95)

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