

**“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 23<sup>rd</sup> SUNDAY -C-**

Wisdom 9: 13-18 Psalm 90 Philemon 9-10, 12-17 Luke 14: 25-33

*By: Jude Siciliano, OP*

Dear Preachers:

I will be tempted to apologize to the congregation this Sunday after I read this gospel passage. What a “turn off” it is with its talk of “hating father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sister and even [your] own life;” and then it asks us to “renounce all your possession,” if we are to be Jesus’ disciples. On first hearing the passage listeners are going to think Jesus inhabited another planet. He certainly sounds far removed from our lives, we who do all we can to: love our parents, especially as they age or become infirm. We agonize over how to best care for them—take them into our homes? bring in home care? place them in a nursing home? We supervise their medications, take them for innumerable medical procedures and checkups, visit them as much as possible, make frequent phone calls, etc. So, what is all this talk about “hating” parents?

And what’s all this talk about “hating” wives? (I suppose here he really means spouses.) With divorce rates approaching 50% in our country and dioceses and parishes doing their best, both before and after weddings, to foster healthy marriages and keep them in tack. How is “hating” your spouse going to sound to married couples in the congregation and those hoping to get married? The list of “hatings” goes on in this reading, but you get the point. Could Jesus really mean such harsh sounding statements? And if he does, are we ready to renounce all possessions to follow him? Do we know anyone who has? And if they have, who is buying their food, paying their health insurance and housing them?

This is an obvious place for a little research and so I go to the biblical commentaries for help. The word for “hate” is taken from the Greek word that is used in biblical passages to suggest a lesser love. It doesn’t refer to the rage and fury that hate signifies in our language. It could mean having a secondary attachment to someone or thing, the kind of detachment that would enable a person to turn away from whomever or whatever distracts them from following Jesus and the demands of discipleship. God wants us to love and that certainly includes our families and spouses. Remember, Jesus called his disciples to love even enemies; he certainly would include in that love those closest to us, like parents, spouses, children and brothers and sisters. Notice that he mentions the cross right after speaking about “hating.” To bear the cross here doesn’t mean putting up with those afflictions in life over which we have little say. Rather, we can see from the context that we may experience pain as we make choices to stay the course--- to continue with Jesus on the road to Jerusalem and suffering.

Having said all this, Jesus is still placing demands on those who would join him on his journey. Let's not presume the listeners in Jesus' day were any less put off by what Jesus just said. They may have been poor, but they cherished possessions too and, like us, probably wanted or needed more of them. Family life, if anything, was even more precious to Jesus' contemporaries. While we prize individuality and being able to "go it on our own," at that time, a person's very identity depended on membership in family, clan and religious sect. Prestige and reputation were intimately linked to the social standing people had in their social network. If a person at that time packed up and decided to set out on their own—they would, in effect, lose their identity.

Earlier in this gospel Jesus spelled out what characterized the new family relationship he came to establish. His new family would be those who hear and respond to God's word (8:21; 11:27-28). So, if we are to be part of this new family, other ties and allegiances are to be secondary and even put aside, if necessary. As his followers we are in a new network of relationships, a new family that consists of those who have, like us, chosen to follow Jesus. In this family we will be mixing it up with a whole new set of people—those with and those without wealth and social status. We heard two weeks ago that "some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last." Jesus has come to establish something very different from our usual ways of relating. Obviously it is not going to be "business as usual."

This new mixture will be quite a shock to the system of those who were well-connected in life. Reminds me of the day I was walking through the prison yard with some new volunteers. They were friends from a nearby parish and had given up their Sunday morning with family and friends to worship with inmates at the prison chapel. One looked around at the scene of hundreds of inmates milling around in the yard we were walking through and said to me, "this is really stretching me."

There it was—"stretching!" What he was saying was how strange he found it, coming from his family and social background, to be in such a very different place. And pretty soon he was going to be celebrating mass with some of them! You could almost hear him saying to himself, "How did I get here anyway?" Following Jesus is what got him away from his familiar setting to "stretch" into a new world. He continued visiting the prison monthly and came to know a whole new family, people he would later refer to as "my brothers at the prison." Quite a stretch!

But not to be entered into lightly, Jesus warns us. Think it over, Jesus says. Be like a person who is about to build a tower—will you be able to finish the job? Be like a king going to battle

and “decide” if you can win the battle with the resources you have. Notice the examples Jesus uses—“building” and “marching into battle.” The first suggests a long project. We Christians are in a building process, the job feels half done at times as we look at our shortcomings and inadequacies in discipleship. We are not yet the model, generous and self-sacrificing disciples we ought to be. Well, don’t lose hope, the tower project isn’t finished yet. Or, as the saying goes, “Be patient with me, God isn’t done with me yet.”

The battle metaphor also gives us cause to pause and “decide” if we want to make the sacrifices needed to be a disciple. It is a harsh metaphor in this present time of war, but it does suggest the arduous efforts and even pain sometimes asked of disciples. Even though we have already given our “Yes” to following Christ, there are times in our lives when we are asked to make choices that put our discipleship on the line. Some options require us to say “No” to what seems like attractive or easier ways of acting. These choices may put us at odds with family, friends or our surrounding culture; but we know we must choose in ways that echo the gospel we believe. At these times, today’s reading reminds us that we are in the midst of building a tower and that there is more to be done on the project. Or again, that we are in a battle and we need to gather our resources if we are to succeed. Do we have enough to make the right decisions, pay the price, endure the subsequent consequences of our choices? Probably not—but then, none of us have enough resolve, wisdom and strength on our own.

That is why we come to church, gather with one another to hear the Word and then draw close to be fed from the table. Look around at who is here with us, people we don’t usually see during the week, or socialize with on weekends. But here we are in a most cherished and important place, and whatever the political persuasion or economic and social status of those with us—nevertheless, we are a new kind of family, with people we now call sisters and brothers. That stretches us, doesn’t it? Just as Jesus predicted when he invited the crowds he met on the road to turn towards him and make him the priority of their lives.

## **ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER**

Kevin J. O’Neil, C.S.S.R., *THE ESSENTIAL MORAL HANDBOOK: A GUIDE TO CATHOLIC LIVING*. (Missouri: Liguori Publications, 2003) Paper, \$13.95. ISBN 0-7648-0922-9.

What preacher these days couldn’t use a good review of the basics of moral theology; one that also includes contemporary developments in technology—especially in the area of medical ethics? This is a book accessible to the thoughtful reader and will have an appeal to many in lay and ordained ministries, but also to anyone looking for guidelines to help navigate our increasingly complex world.

## QUOTABLE

The first thing to be said is that the New Testament exhorts us to be holy. “Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us.” (Eph 5: 1-2). The primary concern is not merely discerning what is permitted and what is prohibited; rather the primary concern of the Scriptures in terms of morality is to exhort people to be and to do more than the minimum. Scriptures offer encouragement to walk towards Christian sanctity and to live as Christ did, to imitate his freedom of heart, his love for the poor, his chastity, his kindness, and compassion. In other words, the Scriptures call us to do more than just avoid certain behaviors or even to be satisfied with behavior that does not harm. Scripture should make us ask the question: “What will lead to Christian fullness and what will lead the Christian community to grow in love and hope?”

---Kevin J. O’Neil, C.S.S.R., page 120.

## HUNGER FACTS

More than 800 million people in the world go hungry. In developing countries, 6 million children die each year, mostly from hunger-related causes.

In the United States, 13 million children live in households where people have to skip meals or eat less to make ends meet. That means one in ten households in the U.S. are living with hunger or are at risk of hunger.

### **But we CAN end hunger.**

We have the means. The financial costs to end hunger are relatively slight. The United Nations Development Program estimates that the basic health and nutrition needs of the world's poorest people could be met for an additional \$13 billion a year. Animal lovers in the United States and Europe spend more than that on pet food each year.

What makes the difference between millions of hungry people and a world where all are fed?

### **Only a change in priorities. Only the will to end hunger.**

Want to learn more? Bread for the World Institute collects facts on domestic and global hunger. It also generates answers to frequently asked questions about hunger. Or you can learn about what issues Bread for the World members are working on right now to bring an end to hunger in the U.S. and around the world. You can also get involved or write a letter to your member of Congress.

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## 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:.....

- Richard Cagle #0061528 (On death row since 6/16/95)
- Patrick Moody #0463160 (7/20/95)
- William Morganherring #0180479 (7/22/95)

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