

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 24th Sunday -C-

Exodus 32: 7-11, 13-14 Psalm 51 I Timothy 1: 12-17 Luke 15: 1-32

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

I reflected on these readings with 7 other preachers and what follows comes from that reflection. We focused on the Gospel, but we did notice the common theme of conversion and forgiveness by God. I think it unwieldy to preach on all three readings, when we attempt it, none of them get the service they demand. Also, thematic preaching in a liturgical setting runs the risk of leaving behind the concrete situation of the particular reading. E.g. To preach on the theme of forgiveness may ignore the particular shape forgiveness manifests in the Exodus reading; or the unique experience of grace Paul refers to in the Timothy reading.

A word on the Exodus selection, a gem for preaching. Three chapters in Exodus narrate the Golden Calf incident, a significant break in the narrative of God's giving Moses instructions on Sinai. One senses that this is an important story for the Jewish community. They are telling a tale of their own infidelity. And according to the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures, their disobedience is not a one-time-occurrence. They seem to be saying, "See, even in our golden moments, we walked out on God." But the point they wish to make is that God did not walk out on them. Divine fidelity is at the root of our vocation--- God's fidelity in the light of our lack of fidelity. Moses is shown as the intermediary before an angry God. I would be careful not to slip into reinforcing notions like our need to implore a "stern God" who, thanks to an intermediary, finally gives in. I think Moses knew all along with what kind of God he was dealing. The Jewish tale reminds us that God gives in all the time to our coming for forgiveness. God is predisposed and there waiting for us. (Hence, the choice in the Lectionary of the Prodigal Son in the Gospel reading.)

In 1 Timothy, Paul has the same idea. God is grace-endowing, stirring up the very repentance that has us turning to God in the first place. I think the core Gospel message is here. (It's in every NT passage, just clearer here.) The preacher has reason to get "evangelical" from this reading, to state a clear articulation of (1) the human condition, (2) the God who comes to our rescue (3) and the kind of response we now are enabled to make.

The preachers I reflected with thought the Gospel passage for today too long! Granted--- but it does have the literary effect of repetition of a key message and the dramatic effect of building to the third and most important parable of the three.

In our reflections, we got no further than the first parable. We noticed that Luke has the 3 parables as a response to a particular setting. The disreputable are attracted to Jesus and this stirs up the scribes and Pharisees to note that he, "welcomes sinners and eats with them." "Welcome" means more than "tolerate" or "lets them sit around." Welcome is more active, more out-going. So, the religious leaders see what Jesus is doing, welcoming the "obvious sinners". These religious experts thought they knew God better. What Jesus is showing is that God not only "lets sinners in" but goes out of the way searching for them and gets excited about finding them.

We talked about the shepherd's "jubilation" and one grandparent said it's what he feels each time he picks up his grandchild. Notice the shepherd has to follow where the lost sheep takes him: the one lost determines where the shepherd will go and not vice-versa. God trails us to the worst places, even into the dark recesses of our stubborn or indifferent hearts. The part we hate most about ourselves is the place God ventures to bring us out.

We thought the parable had its own absurdity--all three parables seem to be absurd! To Jesus' question, "Who among you, if he has a hundred sheep and loses one of them, does not leave the 99 in the wasteland and follow the lost one until he finds it?" --- we answered, "None of us would do that, the others would be endangered in the wasteland!" The parable exaggerates to make the point; those who seem worthless and not worth our time, are the preferred in the realm of God.

The preacher needs to be more concrete about who are the "worthless"—those we think not worth our time--but worth God's. The feeling seems to be that we should be more cautious about whom we forgive in God's name. For example, here in NC, we executed a real insane killer who had awful hallucinations as he killed two elderly couples. The voices for his execution were very strong. "He doesn't deserve mercy" people shouted, "Look at what he did to those poor people he killed!" Or, in church circles, some people think we have "made confession too easy" with our communal penance services. We want it to be more difficult to get forgiveness. We want to feel that we have "earned" it, that God owes it to us for what we have done to show our sorrow. Instead, the parable makes it quite clear, forgiveness comes as quickly and undeservedly as it did to the son in the story, even before the apology could be finished.

You might want to tie in the Eucharist with the accusation they made against Jesus, that he ate with sinners. Who at the Eucharist is not a sinner? Yet the meal is Jesus himself given to those who have wandered either only a little distance, or to those who have wandered to a far off country.

Do you know the story of John Newton (1725-1807)? It's a turn-around-story. Who could be more lost and despicable than a captain of a slave ship? He had nearly drowned off the coast of Newfoundland as a crew member on a returning slave ship. As the ship was struggling and the crew bailing water the callous sailor dimly remembered his mother reading the Bible to him when he was very young. He remembered prayers she had taught him, and he began to pray. The tattered ship made it to Ireland, just barely. Newton examined his life, his rowdy ways as a sailor and he recalled the terribly crammed African slaves whom he had helped take across the Atlantic into slavery. When he became captain of his own ship he resolved to treat his captives more leniently than he had seen them treated on other ships he had worked. But he continued the prayers of his youth that he had returned to during the stormy Atlantic crossing. And he continued to change as he watched the agony of the humans he was transporting to slavery.

In the midst of one crossing, he suddenly ordered his crew, "Turn the ship around". He took the captives back to Africa. He had turned the ship around by an order he had given and now, following another voice, he began to turn his life around. He returned from a far country. He gave up the slave trade, wrote an influential pamphlet against slavery and became a minister in the Church of England. We may not have known the name of John Newton, but who among us has not sung the hymn he wrote, "Amazing Grace"?

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

Heather Forest, "Wisdom Tales from Around the World", Little Rock: August House, 1996. I read the above tale of John Newton in this collection of folk tales. It contains fifty marvelous tales from various religious traditions. It's a rich source of stories for both children and adults and a great resource for preachers.

QUOTABLE:

"A story can be a powerful teaching tool. In folktales told far and wide, characters may gain wisdom by observing a good example or by bumbling through their own folly....Over time, a tale can take root, like a seed rich with information, and blossom into new awareness and understanding. By metaphorically, or indirectly, offering constructive strategies for living, ancient wisdom tales resonate with universal appeal, even though their plots may have originated in a faraway time and place."

—from the Introduction to "Wisdom Tales from Around the World".