

First Impressions 26th SUNDAY -C-
Amos 6: 1, 4-7 Psalm 146 I Timothy 6: 11-16 Luke 16: 19-31
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

I was reading a book recently on the American civil rights movement during the second half of the twentieth century. A very important time in our history. The images from those times stay with us today and continue to spur on people who work for peace and justice in our nation and throughout the world. It will be of no surprise that one of the most important people in the book is Martin Luther King, Jr. His story is well known, and his speeches and sermons still inspire us today. But what touched me in his story was his very human side. He was afraid of the violence that began to congeal around him and his family. In a particularly heated period, he even considered quitting his efforts and getting out of town. He also feared being alone and didn't like close spaces. So, he wanted to avoid being locked up and confined, which makes his story even more striking. Despite his fears, how many times was he ready to face hostile crowds and the police; how many times did he get arrested and had to enter the close quarters of a jail cell?

In 1963 King was involved in sit-in demonstrations in Birmingham, Alabama. The police chief there was Bull O'Connor, who announced to the world how he would treat demonstrators, men, women and children----with dogs and fire hoses. King got arrested in a demonstration on April 12, 1963. His followers knew the toll solitary and close confinement would have on him. They sneaked him some paper and pencils so he could write and fill in the time. They also knew he was growing discouraged. While in jail, King wrote his famous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," April 16, 1963. He addressed the letter to the white Christian and Jewish religious leaders, (whom he called, "men of good will"), who told him it wasn't time for this demonstration, that things were improving and were getting better.

From his cell King wrote, "I'm writing for the nobodies who suffer from nobodiness." King made an allusion to the ancient prophets who, "left their villages and carried their 'thus saith the Lord' far beyond the boundaries of their home towns" (Cf today's first reading from Amos.). He said, "Time is not neutral...things don't automatically get better by waiting for them to change....Actually, people who aren't suffering have plenty of time and can be patient....While you're suffering you can't wait. You have to use time creatively while you have it....I'm writing for the nobodies to the somebodies. I'm writing for the people who have no time to people who have the leisure of time."

King was trying to reach out from his cell in Birmingham to bridge the gap to the other side. He had to bridge the gap if there were going to be justice for an oppressed people. He had to bridge the gap because our society keeps the gaps. I heard about an attempt to re-introduce one room school houses in rural areas of our country where the education budgets were limited. One of the effects reported in the experiment was that it broke down the artificial age barriers that exist in schools. In the one classroom school, all children could have their “works of art” displayed on the board, from stick figures to more complicated drawings. Something else happened. Normally separated older children began taking care of younger ones, helping teach them, buttoning their jackets, etc. One usually tough child, who had conflict at home, starting taking care and nurturing a young boy the older kids used to pick on. A teacher said, it was “one of the most caring examples I have ever seen among kids.” Gaps were being bridged.

We want the best for our kids and so we start teaching them early. But we have busy schedules and so we don’t always have time to bridge the gaps in our own lives, much less train our children how to do that in theirs. Even the schools we send our children to for the best education we can get them seem to maintain the gaps that exist in our society and world. You do hear about schools that provide summer programs for their students to reach out and help others who are less fortunate—either across town, or in another part of the world. Churches try to bridge the gaps: a suburban parish helps support an inner-city housing project, not just through money donations, but by members volunteering to work alongside local people. One woman in such a parish outreach program said, “I’ve made friends with people I never would have met in my life. And you know what? It has made me less judgmental of people. Now I feel more compassionate when I hear things on the news that affect my new friends. Actually, I get more than I give.”

Why bother bridging the gaps? Well obviously, there are human beings on the other side. And what’s more, today we hear the parable Jesus told us about gaps. He describes a situation in this life and says that in the next life, things will be in reverse. What is startling in the parable is that the rich man dies and finds himself in the netherworld; but he did nothing wrong. He committed no crime. Someone reading the parable once said, “He must have done something bad; maybe it was omitted from the story.” Nothing was omitted from the story. It is just the story Jesus tells and wants us to hear.

I wonder, if the rich man were our contemporary, what would his funeral have looked like? It would have been in a lovely church, in the good section of town, with plenty of people attending and with respectable business people, like himself, as pallbearers. Some clergy person would eulogize his respectable life, and a friend or family member would say good things about him. The congregation would periodically nod in agreement. Everyone would talk

about how he would be missed. The poor man, on the other hand, would have gone to the place other poor are buried, a common grave, and he would be forgotten.

The parables are not a literal description of the next life. They don't tell us how the furniture will be arranged in heaven or the temperature in hell. I don't know what it will be like after we die. People will be there and so will God. Jesus isn't describing the next life in today's parable, as much as he is speaking about this one and how we are to live in it. The parable is meant to shake us up. What we do today, as insignificant as it may seem, makes a difference and has ultimate importance.

For the rich man in the parable, it is too late. In Dicken's, "Christmas Carol," Jacob Marley returns from the dead to tell Ebenezer Scrooge that he will be visited by three spirits. After his night with the spirits, Scrooge wakes up and changes his life. That's what today's parable is trying to do. It really is a parable of mercy, a wake-up call. It is like the sound of an alarm clock that wakes us to a very important day in our lives—today. The future hasn't happened yet. Like Martin Luther King, writing from his jail cell on behalf of the "nobodies" to the "somebodies," the parable is trying to bridge the gap our usual world imposes on us.

We are reminded that God bridged the gap first and continues to bridge the gap for us each time we gather for Eucharist. Through Christ, God has wiped out the barrier of sin that kept us apart—separated from God and walled off from each other. We were the poor person sitting outside at the door. God sees us and continues to see us each time we beg for food; each time we extend our empty hands.

In the early days of the church, pagan writers and historians writing about Christian worship were scandalized. They saw what could not happen in their own society; what contradicted their experience and shocked their sensibilities. At Eucharist, the poor and rich, slaves and free, women and men, were eating at the same table. There were no gaps between them because Jesus' life, death and resurrection had brought them together. To hear the parable is to be called to transformation, to a re-visioning. We are invited to make our world resemble the values and reality of the parable.

We are already well into election time here in the States. We realize that in a time of political rhetoric, there is a danger we would look only to our personal interests and push the Lazarus at our doorstep further and further away from our consciousness and concern. We need to be asking ourselves, as the national debate continues to heat up, how will what we decide nationally and locally affect the poor? Who is Lazarus at our nation's doorstep and how should we respond?

QUOTABLE

There was a time when the church was very powerful in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators." But the Christians pressed on, in the conviction that they were "a colony of heaven," called to obey God rather than man. Small in number, they were big in commitment. They were too God intoxicated to be "astronomically intimidated." By their effort and example, they brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide. and gladiatorial contests.

Things are different now. So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an arch-defender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent and often even vocal sanction of things as they are.

But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust.

-----Martin Luther King, Jr. in, "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

JUSTICE NOTES

(Today's justice reflection is specific for Sacred Heart Cathedral in Raleigh, NC. But it doesn't take much imagination to adapt it to our own parish and personal circumstances.)

"There was a rich man...who dined sumptuously each day. And lying at his door was a poor man named Lazarus." (Luke 16:19)

As a parish community, we are "rich". We "dine sumptuously" at the table of the Eucharist and most of us have more than enough of food, clothing and shelter, (wealth indeed in terms of much of the world's poor.) Being in downtown, the poor are at our doorstep as well. They come because we are here, near the bus station, near the shelters and near the soup kitchen. They come because we are "Church", and because they are seen and recognized. It is not always easy, but at Sacred Heart the poor receive a welcoming, respectful invitation to "come in" and be at home. For those in crisis, some small financial relief given from the "**Door Fund**" is often an additional sign of Sacred Heart's love of the poor.

Did you know?

1. Each Wednesday and Friday afternoon many poor people who are not part of our parish come to our door asking for help. The parish staff welcomes them as Christ.
2. One of our parish teenagers asked his friends to bring a monetary contribution for Sacred Heart's Support Circle Ministry instead of a birthday gift when they came to his 16th birthday celebration.
3. Sacred Heart Parishioners open their arms to the poor by:
 4. Bringing Eucharist and praying with those in prison.
 5. Helping local homeless individuals and families through parish support circles.
 6. Volunteering at Catholic Parish Outreach and Passage Home.
 7. Donating food and financial support on Share Sunday
 8. Serving meals at the Helen Wright Shelter for women, to families in the WIHN program and to the neediest poor on Saturdays at Moore Square.
 9. Serving the elderly through Caregivers.

What can I do?

10. If you are able, you can make a contribution to the **Door Fund, which** supplies emergency support for Raleigh's poorest. Contributions can be made by check to "Sacred Heart" with a notation "**Door Fund**". All contributions placed in the Poor Box in the back of Church are also used for the Door Fund, also known as "Open Door" Ministry.
11. Pray that all of us learn to first see and then respond to the poor in all the needs they bring to our lives.
12. If you have a heart for the poor and are regularly free on Wednesday or Friday afternoon, consider joining the Open-Door Ministry team.
13. Contact Sacred Heart's Social Concerns Ministry Office, 832-6030 ex. 16 to join other parishioners in any of these ministries of outreach to the poor.

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

"It is time to abandon the death penalty -- not just because of what it does to those who are executed, but because of how it diminishes all of us... We ask all Catholics--pastors, catechists, educators and parishioners -- to join us in rethinking this difficult issue and committing ourselves to pursuing justice without vengeance. With our Holy Father, we seek to build a society so committed to human life that it will not sanction the killing of any human person.

-----("Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice," U.S. Catholic Bishops, Nov. 2000,)

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."

If the inmate responds, you might consider becoming pen pals.

Please write to:.....

- Paul A. Brown #0051026 (On death row since 8/11/00)
- Timothy L. White #0434845 (8/31/00)
- Mark. Squires #0688223 (5/17/0)

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