

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 27th SUNDAY -C-

Habakkuk 1: 2-3, 2: 2-4 Psalm 95 2 Timothy 1: 6-8, 13-14 Luke 17: 5-10

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Today's gospel feels disjointed. How do we get from having faith the size of a mustard seed to a story about servants doing what they (we) are supposed to do? The section of Luke from which today's passage is taken includes the first four verses of chapter 17 (not part of today's reading). Luke gives four sayings, and the theme of discipleship ties the four sections together; two are makeup today's passage. It's a shame that we do not have all four sayings. Just prior to the opening of our passage (verses 3-4), Jesus teaches about the necessity to forgive seven times a day, if "seven times a day your brother or sister turns back to you saying, 'I am sorry.'" The number seven is one of those biblical numbers that has symbolic meaning and can't be translated literally. It is not as if, after I forgive seven times, my obligation is complete. Rather, seven is a number that sets no limits. You can imagine how chagrined the apostles must have been! No end to forgiveness!? They realize the difficulty of the question and that they cannot be such extraordinary disciples on their own. They will need faith.

The disciples know what they must do to be followers of Jesus, but knowing it and doing it, as Jesus just described, are two different things. Discipleship isn't merely a matter of learning the ground rules, keeping them and getting a deserved reward. Rather, the gift of faith comes first and as a result of the gift, our response is the desire and ability to do what Jesus is asking of us. Who among us, already disciples, has not looked at an upcoming challenge to what we believe and realized we could never do it on our own? Nor did it feel that we could do it on the little faith we felt we had. Our prayer replicates that of the apostles—"Increase our faith." I'm struck by the directness of their request. You can sense the urgency and desperation they must have felt; you can hear the pleading in their voice, as if to say, "We'll never be able to follow this teaching, give us more faith!"

Jesus won't let them wallow in despair, nor will he let them or us get away with the excuse, "I just don't have enough faith." In the original language his response really sounds something like this, "Since you do have faith the size of a mustard seed...." The faith they already have enables them to do great things and as an

example, he exaggerates and tells them, “You could pull up the deep-rooted mulberry tree and cast it into the sea with the faith you already have.”

Of course, he is not suggesting that disciples are to go around doing daily acts of wonder and spectacle----drink this poison, handle that snake, move this mountain, uproot that mulberry tree. But his teaching to them, on their journey to Jerusalem, is that they are to share the cup of suffering with outcasts and the poor; take hold of poisonous and unjust structures and handle them; move mountains of indifference and uproot racism, agism, and sexism whenever they come upon them. We would protest, “Our faith is weak and small.” He would respond as he did to his apostles, “You already have faith and what I have given you is enough to do the work of discipleship!” Of course, the biggest task we disciples have to face over and over again, the one that pushes us to the limits and unmasks our recalcitrance is the obligation to forgive “seven times a day.”

The command to forgive exposes us to the very core of the gospel message: on our own we cannot live this life to which Jesus is calling us. But with the gift of the mustard seed of faith, his life becomes possible in us. In addition, living his mandates, especially the one he just gave them about forgiveness, will be a visible sign to others who observe us that Jesus, the one who prayed from the cross for forgiveness for his killers, still lives in the community of his followers.

You may choose to focus your preaching on the next parable, about the master and the servant. Jesus asks a rhetorical question, “Who among you...?” The expected reply is, “None of us would.” No one expects a servant coming in from the fields to sit down and expect to be served by the master or mistress of the house. That’s not the way such relationships work—servants are expected to do their job. (By the way, in the original Greek, it’s “slave” not servant. Jesus is drawing upon social circumstances of his day to make a point. We know he is not condoning slavery, it’s just that such relationships were the backdrop to his listeners’ world.) The servant/slave in this story is at the disposition of the master. In such a situation, the one serving has no basis to expect special privileges or to boast about how hard he/she has worked for the master. What was done was the servant’s duty, it was supposed to be done—that’s that. Nothing special and no special reward is due.

Parables are about God’s dealings with us. God is gracious to us and each day

gives us the faith we need to face whatever the day brings. We respond to the gift and “accomplish” the works of disciples. Sometimes these accomplishments feel like we have done the impossible (like pulling up a mulberry tree). And we have. But there is nothing to boast about, we have responded to a gift and done what we were supposed to do. In the context of today’s section, the work we were supposed to do is to forgive seven times. We have no grounds to say, “I’ve accomplished a great deal, now I can await my reward.” We can’t get puffed up as disciples, the accomplishment was not ours. That’s the way discipleship works; we don’t have a claim on God. Being a faithful disciple is a daily gift and has daily responsibilities. We are not the ones in charge. Thankfully God is, and God will always be there to help us serve another day in the fields and at the table.

The Eucharist turns the parable around. We have come in from the fields of our labors and gather in community before God. We have done much to fulfill our vocations as parents, caretakers, volunteers, job-holders, students, ministers, etc. We can grow weary, and we need to be waited on and that is what God does for us---has us sit around the banquet table. There God serves us with a special chosen Word to empower us and the bread and wine to renew us with Jesus’ life for the return trip to the fields and serving places of everyday life.

GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

John R. Donahue, S.J., *THE GOSPEL IN PARABLE*. Fortress Press, 1998. These past Sundays, and the ones to come feature parables. The parable genre appears in Matthew, Mark and Luke and as a literary form, has its unique characteristics. The preacher needs to know these characteristics to avoid misinterpretation. Donahue’s book is excellent. It is clear that he had preachers in mind for he concludes his study with suggestions on contemporary proclamation of the gospel parable. I highly recommend this book..

QUOTABLE:

“Each gospel is a narrative presentation of the Christ event, that is, the significance that the person, teaching, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth had and still has for human history. In the Gospel contexts the ethics of the parables is in response to the mercy and love of God manifest in the Christ event”.

—John R. Donahue, S.J., in *THE GOSPEL IN PARABLE*, page 211.

JUSTICE NOTES

Poverty, USA: The State of Poverty in America

In America's forgotten state, 32.3 million people live in poverty. (U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, March 2000)

Poverty USA is bigger than Texas, Florida or New York. More people live within its boundaries than in the states of Connecticut, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, New Jersey and Nevada combined. (Based on 1999 U.S. Census Bureau population data)

Nearly half of all poor people in the U.S. suffer from "chronic poverty," which means that they have lived or will live below the poverty rate for more than two years. (Poverty 1993-94: Trap Door, Revolving Door or Both?, Mary Naifeh, 1998)

In 1999, the official poverty threshold, as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau, for a family of four was \$17,184. A 2000 poll revealed that most Americans believe it takes at least \$35,000 annually for a family of four to make ends meet. (By Lake, Snell, Perry and Associates for Jobs for the Future)

The average American, now age 20, has about a 60% chance of spending at least one year living in poverty at some point in the future. By age 35, about 31% of the U.S. population will have experienced a year in poverty. By age 65, the figure rises to 51%, and by age 85, it exceeds 66%. ("The Likelihood of Poverty across the American Adult Life Span" by Mark R. Rank and Thomas A. Hirschl, Social Work, May 1999)

----U.S. Catholic Conference