

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 30th SUNDAY

Sirach 35: 12-14, 16-18 Psalm 34 2 Timothy 4: 6-8. 16-18 Luke 18: 9-14

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The first and third readings continue the subject of prayer from recent weeks. Either reading could easily be the focus of the preaching. However, the gospel parable has such a dramatic contrast between the Pharisee and the tax collector that it will certainly have a powerful pull on the imagination of the hearer. Perhaps it is just too powerful for the preacher to ignore. Nevertheless, let's look first at Sirach.

Sirach is part of the wisdom literature tradition. Written by the sage Jesus ben Sirach around 180 B.C.E., it presents later Jewish beliefs during the Hellenistic time. Since this is late in the Jewish canon it shows a well-developed theology of prayer. Wisdom literature draws upon one's experience and attempts to offer good advice for living in the world. It links upright living with rewards; sinful living with collapse and punishment. Wisdom is seen as a gift from God to help humans in their daily lives. If we are to find our success in what is lasting and good we would do well to heed the guiding voice of wisdom writers like ben Sirach.

Today's passage is excerpted from a larger context (34:18- -35:20) that addresses proper worship. It was chosen for this Sunday because of its parallels with the gospel parable about prayer. First Sirach names God: "The Lord is a God of justice who knows no favorites." We are told that God hears the prayers of the poor and oppressed as well as the prayer of those who serve God. Sirach links God's justice with an inclination to hear the "cry of the oppressed." If the just God leans in the direction of those treated unjustly, then by extension, we had better link our prayers to living just lives. If we are the source of the injustices against those to whom God is inclined, then we must clean up our act! How can our prayers be truly sincere if our lives do not show just relations with others? The church in which we worship today does not have a moat around it separating us from the world outside. Our piety here must be reflected in just living "out there."

Nor can we be indifferent to injustices done by other individuals or by structures in the world. God loves us all, but the God of the bible shows a distinct inclination towards the poor and oppressed. Why? Maybe those who are well off already

have a lot on their side. Maybe God stands with those who don't have the resources for education and legal advice to present their case before the ears of society. All the poor have are their cries for help as they hope to be heard by society. And they have their cries to God. Sirach assures them that with God, at least, they do not meet a deaf ear.

Just when we seem to have the formula: God hears the cries of the oppressed and those who serve the God of justice, Jesus tosses a parable in our midst that puts another truth before us. No work we do, no accomplishments we claim, automatically earn a privileged hearing before God. We want to be found right before God, but we cannot earn that righteousness by our own achievements. The parable presents this truth more vividly in its narration of the two at prayer in the temple. It is a uniquely Lucan parable and shows his strong interest in prayer. Luke's gospel is laced with Jesus' own prayer and his teachings on prayer. Last week we had the prayer parable about the persistent widow. She is a needy and seeming powerless figure and our sympathies go out to her. Today's parable is different, both for Jesus' original hearers and for us. The widow would have been an admirable model for prayer; the tax collector isn't. Tax collectors were hated since they betrayed their Jewish sisters and brothers by cozying up to the Romans and collecting taxes for them from the Jews.

Let's not automatically make the Pharisee a villain. He represented the best in religious society; his life reflects care about things religious. Pharisees were pious lay people and religious leaders dedicated to their religious observance and admired by others of their faith. The Pharisee in the parable even exceeds what was required of a devout Jew. He is praying a prayer of thanksgiving, grateful to God for keeping him from sin. Jesus' audience, people like this Pharisee, convinced of their own righteousness, might have approved of this man's prayer. But even as he thanks God, he is taking credit for his exemplary behavior. He certainly has a lot of "I's" in his prayer.... "I am not like the rest of humanity....I fast twice a week and I pay tithes on my whole income." And remember, Luke tells us the parable is addressed to those who were "convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else." They "despised *everyone* else," not only those who were like the tax collector, but everyone!

The tax collector has nothing to earn him a hearing before God. His life is a mess. He has made a profit off the backs of God's chosen people. Why should God even

give him the time of day?

He is not like the ones Sirach describes whose prayer God hears—the oppressed class and those who serve God. Even his prayer makes no promise of reform. When he leaves the temple that day does he change his entire life? Let's not project, since the parable doesn't tell us. The tax collector's prayer is simple, honest and needy. He is trusting, not on his own goodness or achievements, but on God's goodness and mercy. Based on his own life's record, he has nowhere to stand, so he wisely, or desperately, chooses to stand on the sure ground of God's mercy. Turns out, his prayer becomes, what Sirach calls, "the prayer of the lowly." His "petition reaches the heavens." What he gets is pure gift, for after all, he is the most needy person in the temple that day.

Reading this parable is like reading Paul, who in a more polemic situation, faces the same faith issue: who is put right before God and on what basis? No one can claim righteousness on their own, no matter what they try to do to accomplish it. How startling this parable would have sounded to those who scrupulously worked hard to get it all right, to line up their merit badges in a neat row on their chests.

The Pharisee has set himself apart and says he is not like "the rest of humanity". But is the echo of the Pharisee in us, do we find his attitude entering our own religious observances? We don't have to scratch very deep to detect that we are, after all, like the rest of humanity. We haven't come to worship because we are so special, we come because we are in need of mercy. We have done our best to perform acts of kindness, make sacrifices, sometimes of an extraordinary nature. Yet we know our failures, we know that our actions don't always measure up to the words we profess here in church. We are, in one way or another, like the rest of humanity, "greedy, dishonest, and adulterous"...like the tax collector. Let's get up and go sit in his pew, the pew of people asking God to hear our prayers, not because we are saints, but because our faith reminds us that God is listening and will respond to heartfelt and honest prayer. We are not entitled to God's free gift of mercy, but we are very grateful to receive it.

As we began today's eucharist we prayed a triple prayer for mercy, "Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy." Before we come forward to receive communion we will ask for forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer, "forgive us our trespasses." We'll also pray as a community, "Lord I am not worthy to receive

you, say but the Word and my soul will be healed.” We are confident God hears these prayers, and they seem less petitions than statements of fact, declarations of what we know is constantly available to us--- the mercy given the tax collector.

The parable may not tell us what happened in the rest of the tax collector’s life. But with the mercy and renewal we receive here at this worship we can have something to say about what happens to the rest of our story. We can go out and determine to be the just people extolled in the scriptures whom Sirach says, “serve God willingly.” These are those who now put themselves on the same side as God is on, our God who “hears the cry of the oppressed....is not deaf to the wail of the orphan, nor to the widow when she pours out her complaint.”

CAUGHT!

Here’s a response from a reader who caught me misusing a metaphor last week!
Mea culpa!

Dear Fr. Jude,

I thoroughly enjoy and often steal directly from your First Impressions for my own homilies. They are extremely well focused and a great help.

However, I was struck by your misuse of the metaphor "the whole nine yards." This metaphor has nothing to do with football, unless football fans have now appropriated it for their own use. The phrase comes from W.W.II. The ammunition for the machine guns came in belts that measured nine yards. When someone got "the whole nine yards," that meant that the entire round was fired, in essence, the battle was so fierce that the gunner used the entire nine yards without stopping.

I just thought that you might like to know this and the derivation of the phrase.
Blessings and peace,
Gerry Downs

QUOTABLE:

Sister Catherine Murray, O.P. sends the following:

Unleashing Our Most Powerful Weapons!

Let us deploy our troops. Let our diplomats seek broad international agreement. Let our soldiers advance first, to clear the field of violence.

Then let us unleash our most powerful weapons!

Let us lay down roads where none has ever been. Let us dig wells of clean water where people can safely drink. Let our armies build hospitals and schools. Let our warriors teach hygiene and mathematics. Let our doctors inoculate against disease, and our soldiers battle malnutrition. Let us scour the Earth clean of terrorism through the merciless application of knowledge, compassion, hope, and tolerance.

Terrorism is the weapon of the desperate and hopeless, the brutally blinded, and the deliberately blind. And we can defeat terrorism. We, America, have the power to do so if we are not ourselves blinded by vengeance, anger, and fear: we hold the light of Liberty.

So let us unleash our weapons of mass construction, even as we deploy our gun ships and missiles to defend our endeavors. Let us carry the battle into the tent cities of the Palestinians and the arid crags of Afghanistan, the doctor and the engineer, shoulder to shoulder with the U.N. peacekeeper and the U.S. soldier. Let us hurl homes at homelessness, unleash law upon lawlessness, and let justice roll down like a mighty river and wash away the unjust.

We have an opportunity, now laid so grievously before us, to start and win a war with our most powerful and uniquely American weapons: love, opportunity, education, and hope. England and Israel teach us that the battle against terrorism takes decades. Let the next generation all over the world say to the terrorist recruiters "Why would we want to harm America, who inoculates our children, houses our poor, champions justice and feeds our hungry?" Only then shall we have defeated terrorism. So let us arm our soldiers and mourn our dead, and take up both the pen as well as the gun.

Let us fix a steely-eyed gaze on the true costs and the real efforts involved, let us gird ourselves against our inevitable losses and unavoidable setbacks. Let us join with all people in all nations who worship in truth and love, and let us set forth on this, the true, final World War.

Let us incessantly, relentlessly wage Peace.

- by Bob Alberti - 9/16/01, 1st Universalist Church of Minneapolis, MN

JUSTICE NOTES:

(These weekly quotes may be helpful in your preaching or may also be added to your weekly parish bulletin as a way of informing your faith community on some social issues.)

September 12, 2001

Pax Christi USA Statement on the Devastation of September 11th

The tragic and overwhelming events of yesterday are only now becoming comprehensible. Our broken hearts cry out for the families and friends of the countless victims in New York, Washington, DC, Pennsylvania and across our nation. Pax Christi USA condemns this unspeakable act of violence.

As America awakes this morning to a new world the first reality to be confronted is the horrific loss of life. No one in the US is left untouched by these events. The deepest grief imaginable now descends upon our people. We are all thankful for the prayers of our sisters and brothers around the world. Let us also remember that God is present with all of us here in the US. We recognize that as the reality of the magnitude of loss becomes clear, our nation's grief will soon move toward rage.

As people of faith and disciples of the nonviolent Jesus, we must be willing, even now in this darkest moment, to commit ourselves and urge our sisters and brothers, to resist the impulse to vengeance. We must resist the urge to demonize and dehumanize any ethnic group as "enemy." We must find the courage to break the spiral of violence that so many in our nation, we fear, will be quick to embrace.

We therefore call for restraint on the part of our nation's civilian and military leaders. The appropriate response to this despicable act is not a despicable act of violence in kind. Vengeance is not justice. The only kind of justice that will honor the memory of all those who lost their lives is a justice based on international law, not reckless retribution.

To follow the nonviolent Jesus in the midst of unimaginable violence is the call and the challenge to which we remain committed. May God's love and strength

provide us the means to be the Peace of Christ.