

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 4TH. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME -C-
Jeremiah 1:4-5, 17-19; Psalm 7; 1 Corinthians 12: 31- 3:13; Luke 4: 21-30
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Seems that half the weddings I attend or preside at, the couple has chosen today's I Corinthians reading, or a shortened version of it—the part that begins, “Love is patient....etc.” Since people have probably also heard this reading in the same settings, I would opt to focus on it for this preaching. My hope is that the text will speak to our lives at this time; but also, that at the next wedding our hearers attend, if this I Corinthians is one of the readings, it will have more meaning. (I hope I am not being too optimistic here; will this preaching even be that memorable? Never mind, doubts like that can stop a preacher in his or her tracks! Let's push on.)

We shouldn't let Paul's lovely prose distract us. Nor should the preacher get rhapsodic trying to soar with the reading's images and leave behind the ground of the real world and church. As lovely as these images are, Paul was not being sentimental or idealistic. There was a lot going on in the Corinthian church that concerned Paul—things haven't changed much. The irony is that as upset with the community as Paul was, you would never guess it from the tone of today's reading. Paul is letting the community know that things aren't what they should be; but he does it by setting a high tone, hoping his readers will try to live up to what he outlines. He is like a parent who hopes praise for a son or daughter will yield favorable behavior. “I just love your visits.”

Preaching from a Pauline letter always requires a bit more background information. We are reading a segment of a longer piece of writing. Getting some sense of context is helpful here. (This need for context applies to the gospels as well, but it is even more important when preaching from the letters since they tend to be more of a sequential writing.) Looking back in I Corinthians one can sense conflict in the community. Paul had been successful in his year and a half preaching to the gentiles in Corinth. After he left, he heard news that the Corinthian church was being broken apart by in-fighting and had formed factions behind one or another church leader—Paul, Apollo or Cephas (1:12). Some even seem to have been claiming a special relationship to Christ. In 1:10ff. Paul urges an end to factions and calls for unity. A quick look at chapter 8 reveals the

community also had its share of elites who thought themselves to be in the “know” about religious dietary observances. Paul warns them that while such elitism “inflates” the person, it divides the community.

The letter reveals that even the eucharistic liturgies showed signs of strain. Apparently there were: cliques in the community; excessive drinking; prejudices against poor members (11:17ff); ecstatic prayer, that seemed more important to some, than the care of the poor. There were even those who doubted the resurrection of the body (chapter 15). Perhaps the divisions came about because of Christianity’s openness to all people. Joining the baptized community broke down religious, cultural, social and economic barriers. The early church, in this cosmopolitan city, had freeborn and slaves; different ethnic and national groups; wealthy and poor; women and men. There probably wasn’t any other place in the city one could find such a mixture as in the small church communities. While other social organizations in the city were more homogeneous, the Christian communities were so very diverse. This mix, as we know today, can be a wonderful sign of God’s reign on earth; but the potential for strife and division was also inherent in the community.

Recall what Paul preached to the Galatians about the abolition of all social and religious prerogatives in the church (Gal. 3:28). We are, regardless of how the world classifies us and some of our very church members behave, all equal as God’s children, all part of the same household—thanks to our baptism in Christ. The early church had to put aside previous rules of behavior and expectations and find new ways of being a community. So, as we read this letter, especially today’s passage, we get an insight into how Paul thought these early Christians could work out their communal struggles and grow in their understanding of what it meant to be Christians. Paul had more than sufficient reason to write this letter. We have our own reasons for reading it, as we are doing in our liturgies these weeks, for some of our church communities also have theological and liturgical skirmishes and neglect or exclude certain economic classes, races, ethnic groups, “foreigners” and the poor.

Today’s reading picks up from those of the past two weeks, in which Paul used the image of the body to describe the church—the “body of Christ.” Baptism has made us one body free of the former stratifications that separated us. We all received the same Spirit but, as Paul told us, individual members have their proper

functions and gifts (wisdom, knowledge, faith, tongues, healing, etc) which are different and not interchangeable. Our desire for unity must also include our need and celebration of this diversity.

After discussing the community's gifts, Paul tells us today, "But I shall show you a still more excellent way." Thus begins the hymn of love. It has three sections: love's superiority (vv.1-3); its actions (vv.4-7) and its permanence (vv.8-13). Paul is speaking of the love we are to have for one another. But this love, often requiring heroic qualities, is not disconnected from our love for God—or God's love for us. Jesus has taught us that love of God and love of neighbor are one. As we hear what love requires, we realize to live the way Paul describes, we will need God's grace. For this love is not something we accomplish by sheer grit and determination. Rather, it is a love made possible for those who know how they themselves have been loved.

I have been at prayer services where this reading was altered. Wherever the word "love" appears, "Christ" was substituted. So, it would read, "Christ is patient, Christ is kind, Christ is not jealous...etc." This prayer-rendition can help us realize that what is being asked of us has already been given to us in Christ. We have confidence that the life of love Paul describes for us here is possible in our daily lives. It is God's gracious life working itself through us and expressed in each person's unique gifts. Imagine the church we would be if each of our gifts were fired by this love and working for the betterment of others!

We might invite our hearers to reflect on the gifts each of us has and how they can be put to the service of the community. All have needed gifts, each is different, and it is clear from what Paul has been saying these weeks, each gift is crucial for the life of the church. The preacher needs to remind us that all the baptized and fully initiated into the life of Christ have a responsibility for the care of both the internal and external life of the church. How effective will the modern church be in its evangelization efforts? Well, that depends on how well those called and gifted by the Spirit turn to the needs around them and address them with love—the gift Paul calls the "greatest of these."

This Sunday and next, two Hebrew prophets will give an account to us of their calls. These readings, from the Hebrew scriptures, will parallel the beginnings of Jesus' ministry recounted for us by Luke. To hear these prophets tell of how it all

started for them should stir up reflection in us about the nature of our own call and how we have responded to God. Jeremiah is an intensely private person, yet throughout his ministry he will share his personal turmoil over his vocation.

There is a clear link in the Gospel to the first reading. Jesus has a task to do. He is called from the womb by God and he, like Jeremiah will be opposed. This reading continues where last week's left off. The preacher may have to put it in context, for the attentive listener might wonder what the opening verse means, "this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing." Which Scripture passage? And it is an important passage? As we heard last week, Jesus uses a passage from Isaiah to voice his "mission statement." He has come to speak and act on behalf of the poor and marginalized. Jesus' ministry will be prophetic; a theme Luke has set up since Mary's response to Elizabeth ("Magnificat"). God is looking favorably on the lowly and plans to overthrow those of high estate. Jesus is going to bring Good News to the poor, those in captivity will be set free, the blind will recover their sight.

This prophetic mission is passed on to his church. Where do we hear this prophetic voice today? Who speaks for the poor today? We may be the blind who need to be given sight? For example, the preacher may need to address our blindness to the plight of the marginalized. In a land where prosperity is increasing we, as a nation, seem less sensitive to the increasing gap between the haves and have-nots. The preacher is called to be that voice of liberty and freedom to the captives. God has seen their need and the preacher is God's voice on their behalf. (Joe and Linda Michon, in the justice notes below show how in simple ways, a parish or family can take the side of the poor in the third world----just by the coffee we drink!)

QUOTABLE

Ellen Gilchrist (FALLING THROUGH SPACE: THE JOURNALS OF ELLEN GILCHRIST, 1987) describes the experience of "stuckness". While she is speaking to writers, what she says also applies to preachers.

"In order to be a writer, you must experience and learn to recognize and cope with periods of what Freeman Dyson calls stuckness. In order to do creative work in any of the arts or sciences you must go through long or short spells of not knowing what is going on, of being irritated, and not being able to find the cause, of being

willing to work as hard as you can and what happens isn't valuable enough, isn't good enough, isn't what you meant to do, what you meant to say. Then you just have to keep on working. Then, if you can bear it, if you don't quit and move to Canada or call up Joe and go hiking for two weeks or quit your job or get a divorce or do anything else to relieve the pain, and it is pain, it's really irritating, it puts you in a bad mood, you are irritable to children and can't focus on anything and keep changing your mind, if you can put up with it and just go right on sitting down at that desk every day no matter how much it seems to be an absurd and useless and boring thing to do, the good stuff will suddenly happen. It may be twelve o'clock at night when you're doing something else or are in the bathtub. It will be when you have given up and least expect it. There it will be, the radium, the formula, the good short story, the real poem.....”
And may we add.... “the good preaching ?”

JUSTICE NOTES

The fundamental sin is exploitation, whether it be expressed in the domination of male over female, white over black, rich over poor, strong over weak, armed military over unarmed civilians, human beings over nature. These analogously abusive patterns interlock because they reset on the same base: a structure where an elite insists on its superiority and claims the right to exercise dominative power over all others considered subordinate, for its own benefit.”

---Elizabeth Johnson, quoted by John Bucki, SJ, on the Center of Concern's webpage.

WRITING TO DEATH ROW INMATES

It is still not too late to make a new year's resolution you can keep. Why not consider a monthly note to an inmate on death row? These inmates 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 “adopt” one of them as a pen pal. This Christian work can be a powerful experience. If you like, tell your new friend you got his name from North Carolina's, “People of Faith Against the Death Penalty.”

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- Parrish Lorenzo Matthews #0666808 (On death row since 5/26/01)
- George Malcolm Kelly #0223210 (5/29/01)
- Jim E. Haselden #0564913 (6/6/01)
- James Hollis Watts #0428143 (7/19/01)

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

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: "FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR C" This compilation, from past "First Impressions," includes two reflections on almost all Sundays and major feasts for all liturgical years. For more information and to purchase go to: <http://PreacherExchange.com>
2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use "First Impressions" in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (FrJude@JudeOP.org)
3. Our webpage address: <https://preacherexchange.com> where you will find "Preachers' Exchange," which includes "First Impressions" and "Homilías Dominicales," as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)
4. "First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

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Thank you.
Blessings on your preaching,
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