

First Impressions 7th SUNDAY -C-

I Samuel 26: 2, 7-9, 12-13, 22-23 Psalm 103 I Cor 15: 45-49 Luke 6: 27-38

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

We live in an age that uses some pretty strict standards when it comes to applying justice. For example, some of our states have a zero-tolerance law. In California there is the “three strikes and you’re out” guideline for sentencing. (For those beyond our borders: the term comes from American baseball where batters who have a third strike against them are called out.) When it was first instituted by the governor and later ratified by voters, it was the most significant change in its state’s criminal justice system in a generation. The law required that people found guilty of a third felony would automatically receive a life sentence. There are stories of people getting twenty-five years to life in prison, even if the third crime was as insignificant as stealing a six pack of beer from a convenience store. The fact that a person had committed a previous crime meant any subsequent offense would be considered a felony. The intention of the law was to take “career criminals” off the streets. One effect of these harsh sentencing guidelines is to remove judicial discretion in sentencing. And of course, it packs prisons with people who are doing very long sentences with little or no hope of release.

But sometimes the unexpected happens, even in a strict judicial system. I read about such an instance a few years ago. A 19-year-old boy on Long Island was charged with assault. He and five teenage friends had been out for a night of joy riding and crime. As the evening progressed they got more and more out of hand. One of the teenage boys tossed a frozen turkey at a passing car. The car’s windshield was shattered. The driver, Victoria Ruvolo, wasn’t killed, but she ended up in the hospital for a series of surgeries, mostly to reconstruct her facial bones.

When the young man was brought to court he pleaded guilty; which meant he could get 25 years in prison. As he was leaving the courtroom he came face to face with his victim for the first time. When he saw Victoria he went over to her. He said he was sorry and begged her for forgiveness. She reached out and cradled his head as he sobbed. She stroked his face and patted his back and said, “It’s ok, it’s ok.” And then she said, “I just want you to make your life the best it can be.” A seriously injured and innocent woman had a chance for retribution for the misery she went through and possibly would have to still go through. However, and here is a big “however,” Victoria Ruvolo insisted the prosecutors grant him a plea bargain instead. (Just when you think you know where a story is going and will wind up, along comes a “However.” And in stories like this, the “However” signals the arrival of grace, when the expected is reversed and the free, unearned and unexpected gift is given.) So, the young man got six

months in jail and five years' probation. The prosecutor had been ready to seek harsh punishment for what he saw, as a brutal and heartless crime. He said, "This is not an act of mere stupidity. This is not a 7- or 9-year-old child."

The newspaper report of Ms. Ruvolo said her compassion seemed to come out of nowhere. It disarmed the prosecutor; he didn't seek the harsh punishment. Who would have blamed this seriously injured woman for wanting a stern punishment? Who could not provide her with logical reasons to insist on punishment? Instead, logic breaks down in the light of her compassion. She chose forgiveness instead of revenge. She gave a gift that was not deserved. She single-handedly gave the young boy his life back; gave him hope in his despair.

The papers didn't report the motive for the woman's act of compassion, though some people said she did it for "religious reasons." But whatever her reasons, someone hearing her story and hearing the gospel story today would draw strong parallels. The forgiving woman was sinned against and for no other reason than her own generous heart, gave forgiveness instead of punishment. She is a symbol of God; the God Jesus speaks of in the gospel. Jesus isn't telling us to be nice and respectful towards people. Etiquette books do that. He is calling us to a higher standard of compassion. He invites us to imitate the mercy we have received from God.

We have all sinned; many times, or few, in large ways or small. In a court of law, we wouldn't have a leg to stand on for misdemeanors or major offenses. But Jesus is the reminder that, not based on our merit or whether we deserved it or not, we have been given mercy. Jesus gives clear directions to his disciples, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. "To whom is God merciful?", we might ask him. "To you," he would reply. And then he would reply, "What are you going to do about it?"... "Give mercy the way you have been given mercy." It's not to earn mercy back, but to express in our daily lives what we believe and are experiencing at this Eucharist, "God has been and is being merciful to me, so I can afford to be that way to you."

I would hazard a guess about Victoris Revulo. Somehow she had come to experience compassion in her life. Perhaps she had forgiving parents, a loving and forgiving friend. Maybe she too had heard what we heard in today's gospel, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." Somehow, she heard it and took the message to heart and so she gave mercy as freely as she had received it.

ONE GOOD PUBLICATION FOR THE PREACHER

JOURNAL FOR PREACHERS, Walter Brueggemann, editor. P.O. 520, Decatur, Georgia 30031-0520. One year, \$15.90. 404-378-7204.

This is a quarterly (Advent, lent, Easter and Pentecost) journal of essays, sermons, announcements and book reviews. It's published at the Columbia Theological Seminary. Always a good read for the preacher.

QUOTABLE

The American Medical Association (AMA) says that, conservatively, two million women are assaulted by their partners each year. Yet they admit that the true incidence of partner violence is closer, in all likelihood, to four million per year. Thirty percent of American women report that they have been abused by husband or boyfriend. In addition, the Bureau of Justice Statistics National Crime Victimization Survey in 1996 indicates that women of all races are equally vulnerable to these attacks. Many ministers hold to the myth that domestic violence is found only in certain cultural, racial, or socioeconomic groups

---Mary Donovan Turner, "Lenten Light: Domestic Violence and Preaching," in *Journal for Preachers: Lent*, 2007, page 26 and page 27.

ASH WEDNESDAY

The Journey begins with ashes. Placing ashes on the body is an ancient biblical practice associated with turning back to God. As Jon Walton reminded us in a sermon that appeared in these pages, Nineveh put on sackcloth and ashes in response to Job's call to repentance. Jeremiah called for Israel's repentance by putting on sackcloth and rolling in ashes himself. Jesus reproached sinful cities because they wouldn't put on ashes and return to God. When ashes are imposed on our foreheads, we receive a stark reminder of our own need to repent-again-and to once more turn away from the forces of evil and turn to God. Repentance is not just about owning up to our various sins; it is an acknowledgment of our very nature-frail, flawed, fickle, and always less faithful than we intend to be. In short, ashes remind us of our *human* nature-our mortality-and the shortness of our earthly life. When God first tells Adam that he is destined to die, God says, "Dust you are and to dust you will return." And so, we say those same words: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

During one memorable Ash Wednesday service at the church where I worship, we went forward for the imposition of ashes. Instead of being marked by a pastor, however, we marked one another with an ashy cross. After I had taken part, I watched from my perch in the choir loft as people imposed the sign of the cross on one another, flesh upon flesh, and spoke those words, sometimes to strangers, sometimes to friends, often to spouse, or child. As I watched a mother lean down to trace a smoky cross on her child's forehead, tears rolled down my cheeks. How could a mother begin to speak words of death to her own child? Quickly tears of pain became tears of joy as I realized that in that gesture a mother does not curse her child but pronounces blessing: You will turn from God only to be drawn in again, she says with that mark. You will die, but in order to live. In life and in death, *you belong to God*. And so, begins the journey

from death to life. To start here, with a bold expression of our creatureliness, is to break open the veneer and create a space for God to lead us through to a renewed life of intentional truth-telling and more profound trust.

---Kinberly Bracken Long, "Forty Days in the Womb: Worshiping in Lent." JOURNAL FOR PREACHES, Page 11.

JUSTICE NOTES

"Stop judging and you will not be judged."

"We recall that Jesus Christ had the experience of an inmate. The night before he died, he was jailed and physically abused. He eventually suffered the capital punishment of his day, the crucifixion. He died, in the eyes of civil authorities, a criminal who had been found guilty by the judges of his day. Among the priorities in the heart and mind of Jesus Christ is the concern for the imprisoned. In Matthew 25, he... identified [with] the jailed. "I was in jail, and you visited me . . . just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Matt. 25:40). *U.S.. Conference of Catholic Bishops*

US Bishops on Prison Reform

In their Pastoral Letter of Nov. 2000, the Bishops of the United States called on Catholics to take a new look at the American criminal justice system. The United States now has more of its citizens in jail than any other developed country, six to twelve times higher than other Western countries. "It is time for a new national dialogue on crime and corrections, justice and mercy, responsibility and treatment."

----***Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration,*** A Statement of the US Catholic Bishops

(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." Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- John D. Mc Neil #0275678 (On death row since 11/10/95)
- Stacey A. Tyler #0414853 (11/14/94)
- Davy G. Stephens #0388922 (12/20/95)

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

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You can order the CDs by going to our webpage: www.preacherexchange.com and clicking on the "First Impressions" CD link on the left.

2. Our webpage: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

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3. "First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Dominican Friars of Raleigh, N.C. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, [Click Here](#).

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Thank you and blessings on your preaching,
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