

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 7TH SUNDAY ORDINARY TIME -C-

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

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Recently a man approached me as I was walking along a downtown city street. He asked for bus money to get home. Since there was a smell of alcohol about him, I turned him down; I didn't want to pay for his drinking. I did offer to get him a sandwich or even buy him the bus ticket, but he just walked on. I think I did the right thing in my spur-of-the-moment reaction. But Jesus' words in today's gospel echo in me, "Give to everyone who asks of you and from the one who takes what is yours do not demand it back." Jesus also says, "...lend expecting nothing back." Is there no wiggle room in these dictates? What if your fourteen-year-old asks for the keys to your new car—do you just toss him or her the keys and say, "Have a good time"?—after all, your child can claim, "But Jesus says to give to those who ask you."

I think some/many people will hear Jesus' words this Sunday, shrug their shoulders and say, "How impractical!" Do these words from Luke's "Sermon On the Plain" sound so other-worldly that they make the everyday practice of faith seem incomprehensible or unrealistic to the average Sunday worshiper—or those inquiring into the teachings of Jesus?

A note on the context and structure of today's gospel passage: The Sermon on the Plain follows Jesus' descent from the mountain where he prayed and chose the Twelve. His words seem to be addressed to his disciples but are spoken in the hearing of a large crowd (6:17). The first part of today's passage (vv. 27-31) stresses that Jesus' disciples do not act the way their tormenters do. Rather, the disciples are to respond in ways that they want to be treated. "Do to others as you would have them do to you." The second section (vv. 32-36) goes further saying that our behavior should not even mimic that of our friends. Instead, our model for behavior is God—who loves even those who do not return that love. We are invited to consider who our teachers are: will we learn from how others behave or will we, as Jesus suggests, have God as our model? The last lines today are open to misinterpretation. The gospel is not a matter of quid pro quo. We don't treat others well so that "a good measure" will be "poured into our laps." God has already poured out an abundant measure for us—overflowing--much more than we deserve. Now our response is to show signs of appreciation by responding to others just as generously. Isn't the eucharist today a reminder that much has already been give us—free of charge?

I do suspect that, while a literal interpretation of the text is not what Jesus had in mind,

nevertheless, he is asking me for a much deeper spirit of tolerance, generosity, sacrifice and love than I am initially willing to give. Indeed, all this is more than I can give by my own efforts. Jesus is asking for a shift in my way of seeing and responding to the world around me. He does want, I think, to pull me out of my mainstream, everyday response to events in my world. As I hear his words, they shake me awake from my sleep walking. They shatter my complacency and sense of satisfaction with how I am “progressing.” His stark words impel me to rethink my usual *modus operandi*, challenge my taking as my norm how others respond in similar life situations. “That’s what everyone does”—cannot be my life’s guide. I am a Christian who believes Jesus has given me a new life source; a new energy and determination for daily living. He has, in other words, given me the same Spirit that was his. And that should make a remarkable difference.

Of course, Jesus gave that Spirit not only to me as an individual believer, but to his church. “The *pneuma* [Spirit] as the mind of God, transforms us so that we can take on the mind of Christ and thereby serve the plan of God as ongoing part of Jesus Christ’s own life and mission.” [John Markey, *CREATING COMMUNION: THE THEOLOGY OF THE CONSTITUTIONS OF THE CHURCH*. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2003, page 109] If we, Jesus’ followers, find our church fitting too comfortably into our society and too accepted in the halls of power and influence, then we have gone to the opposite extreme in interpreting Jesus’ words. While we may have avoided an overly narrow literalism, we risk so diluting or adapting what he says so as to fit who are. We have, in other words, turned a deaf ear to Jesus. We hope today’s liturgy will clear our ears, giving us once again the gift of new hearing we first received in our baptism.

Before we toss Jesus’ words aside as being unrealistic or too idealistic for our “real world,” we do give him the benefit of the doubt, for we believe in him enough to know that his words, when taken to heart, can turn us and our world back to God and to each other. That turning can mean a new and infinitely better world for us—starting now. This new way of living Jesus described as “the reign of God.” Remember just last week we heard Jesus say, “Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom [reign] of God is ours.” Well, we are those poor. We cannot bring about the new order on our own. We are beggars hoping that God will do that work within us. And, responding to our poverty, God does offer us the food we need. By taking the bread and cup today we are responding to an invitation we hear again--- to enter more deeply into the divine life being given us in the reign of God.

Those who accept this reign receive a new way of being in the world. They can set their hearts on God and turn away from human sinfulness. They discover a new priority in their lives: they want to do what God wants for us---our well-being, harmony among diverse peoples, freedom

from all forms of slavery, renewed wholeness and a fulness of life for all humans. The Jews called this new state of being “shalom.” “Shalom” was their greeting to each other when they met—they wished for one another and their land; the profound peace and complete life God promised them.

While Jesus preached that the reign of God would come at the last day, his Sermon on the Plain, which we have been hearing these last weeks, tells us he also preached the immediacy, the nearness of this reign. We don’t have to wait till the end time. God’s “shalom” is constantly breaking into our world; good things are possible for those who change their ways and turn eager hearts to receive the good news. Thankfully we are not just told about a new way of living, nor ordered to follow a list of impossible commands. Instead, Jesus’ Spirit is poured into the hearts of believers, warming them with God’s love and forgiveness and stirring up a desire to live as children of the reign of God.

So, we take seriously what Jesus tells us today. We don’t just dismiss his words as unrealistic. We wrestle with them, ponder how we can live them at home, work, school, and play. While literal interpretation may not be the response Jesus expects from us, nevertheless, he is making a point we need to hear something very different is expected of us if we are to call ourselves his followers. And this “something different” may very well require the acts of great largesse he spells out for us—enormous generosity, forgiveness, trust, love and sacrifice. Why? Because a new world is at hand, indeed has already begun and we are its citizens. People should be able to tell that something new is afoot by the way we act towards one another—friend or foe. When observing us, others should be able to draw an obvious conclusion, “Something new is happening; God is up to something.” We will need this eucharist today. We need the nourishment it gives so we can be strengthened in our resolve to enfold Jesus’ words into our daily lives. We will need the living bread and wine to reanimate our flagging spirits.

Jesus, by your body and blood we ask you to wake us from our sleep-walking. Don’t let our lives slip into a comfortable pattern that resembles more the world’s ways than God’s. Help us have a faith that is not mere duty and routine but, instead, reflects the joy of people who have been surprised by God’s astounding love. Deepen in us, we pray, the awareness of the riches you have poured free of charge into our laps, so that we too can reflect the extravagance of the God who loved us into life.

JUSTICE NOTES

When considering economic, social and environmental policies on behalf of agriculture and rural communities, The National Catholic Rural Life Conference considers the following as one

of its principles:

Preferential Option for the Poor

A fundamental moral measure of any society is to ask how the poor and vulnerable are faring. The poor are those who suffer from lack of basic goods and necessities. The poor bring before us a profound question about the order of the world, and whether this order is truly good. The option for the poor means that we should act - as individuals and as members of community - to overcome the structural injustice of social and world orders.

The National Catholic Rural Life Conference assists by helping to analyze structural problems in our food and agricultural system. As consumers, each of us can decide to end our support of certain foods and food processes that favor large global corporations over small farmers. At the political level, we can fight against social injustice by contacting our local, state and federal representatives and voicing our concern for the rights of farmers and farm workers, the safety and security of our food, and a greater protection of the environment.

Finally, the preferential option for the poor in rural life means to design realistic alternatives to how we currently produce food in an intensively industrial way. The preferential option for the poor is a commitment to transforming society into a place where human rights and the dignity of all are respected. Let us begin to build a new earth based on our new creation as the faithful followers of Christ.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

There are currently six women on death row in North Carolina. And like other death row inmates, they can be the most forgotten people in the prison system. Below I have posted three of their names and their address. 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:.....

- Christene Kemmerlin #0564016 (On death row since 10/18/00)
- Christina Walters #0626944 (7/6/00)
- Carlette Parker #0311386 (4/1/99)

-----North Carolina Institution for Women

1034 Bragg Street Raleigh, NC 27610