

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 8th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (C)

Sirach 27: 4-7 I Corinthians 15: 54-58 Luke 6: 39-45

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

I'll be preaching from today's gospel passage and that will be the focus of these reflections. This part of Luke is from the "Sermon on the Plain." It's similar to Matthew's "Sermon on the Mount" but, as it is with the Gospels, each writer comes at the story from a different perspective. The passage of time, the growth of the church outside its original Jewish setting and the needs of their own church community, dictated that each evangelist tell the story in a way that would speak to his unique community with its special needs and circumstances.

So we can start by asking, why would Luke have written his Gospel account? Mark's account was already in existence, why another Gospel? Wasn't Mark's enough? Luke's community was a very different community from the original followers of Jesus and a different one from Mark's. Luke writes for a church which has already gone through its initial fervor. The earlier concerns of primitive Christianity are no longer present. When Luke wrote the church was a more organized institution. Its members had discovered that Jesus' return was not as imminent as the earlier disciples thought. It was a church getting accustomed to being around for the foreseeable future. It was therefore a church that needed to be challenged again to live a life of prayer, maintain total commitment to the Lord Jesus, shun reliance on money and live a community life that would be a visible sign to others that Christ was alive.

Today's passage continues the Sermon on the Plain. Prior to this discourse Jesus has called his first disciples (5:1-11, 27-32). In Luke's account of this sermon, Jesus, in the presence of the needy crowd, is stating the essential characteristics of his way to his disciples. He is forming his disciples. This passage follows immediately after the one we heard last week, which was addressed "to you who listen."

In today's passage he is describing what should characterize the community of his followers. Imagine a community of people living the kind of life described in this sermon. Jesus wants an entirely new way of living for his followers. First, Jesus

advises that the individual disciples are not to go off teaching the faith on their own until they are formed. They are not to be “superior to the teacher but when fully trained every disciple will be like his/her teacher.” They will have to learn from their teachers, lest they lose sight of the teachings of Jesus and introduce another way of living in the Christian community. In this community people are treated differently. They are not to condemn, judge or find fault with one another. They are to treat one another with compassion and forgiveness.

What, one wonders, would be the effects on a community, if this kindness towards one another were truly present? Such a community would in itself be a preaching of the Gospel, even before any member went out on the road to preach. They would be a sign to all outsiders observing them of radical equity, where all were equal regardless of their social and economic standing. This community is called to a special way of life that imitates Jesus’.

The spirituality Jesus is teaching is not just meant for the enlightenment and behavior of the individual. God’s love is effective; it produces good fruit for the benefit of others. The good fruit we bear becomes a way we teach the faith to others. A parent complains his teenage son does not want to be “lectured” to about religion. But the father wants to make sure his son “knows” his faith. This may very well be a time in their relationship for the father to reflect on how he communicates with his son, as well as how he listens to him. That having been said, there is also a strong faith teaching that is communicated just by the way the father lives his discipleship. The son will “learn the faith” by reading it in the life of his father. In this case the old saw is true, “actions speak louder than words.” Any child is a constant recording machine of his/her parents’ lives. As the child grows, what was passed on through the parents “good fruits,” may be the strength the child needs in a particularly difficult period. A good parent will be a good tree that bears good fruit..., will be a good person who, “...out of the store of goodness in his/her heart produces good.”

Children of such good parents are constantly “eating” the good fruit a parent provided through the example of their lives. So, a woman will explain the source of her remarkable hospitality or concern for the poor and say, “my mother always went out of her way to welcome guests, especially when they were less fortunate than we were.” A grown son will remember, “my father used to volunteer at the parish clothing drive, and so I try to help those in need too.” A good tree bears

good fruit that never seems to stop nourishing and forming another generation of disciples. We could pray at this liturgy for our hearts, that they remain malleable in God's hands and receive the ongoing shaping that God is doing to make them disciples'. When our hearts are good, we will spontaneously produce the good Jesus speaks of, as if by second nature.

Jesus calls attention to the quality of our hearts. "A good person out of the store of goodness in his/her heart produces good...." Our individual hearts need tending. Our church heart needs attention as well. For example, our church communities do not always produce the good fruits of mutual forgiveness. We seem judgmental to non-members, we don't always communicate hospitality to the outsider and marginalized, etc. The preacher may want to develop a reflection on our heart as a community of Christians. Does the community draw from the goodness of its heart? Is our church community the Sermon on the Plain made visible in our age?

Not all that flows from our hearts matches the behavior described in Luke's account of Jesus' sermon. Lent will be a time when we do "heart work." We will open a construction area in our hearts. Think of those construction areas we see about our cities, the "hard hat" places where serious work is going on. That's what will be happening for us in Lent. We are all disciples in training, waiting to be "fully trained," when we will more perfectly reflect the life of Christ. Like Luke's community, we continually need to hear again the instructions of the Teacher. Jesus is also speaking of himself as our teacher when he says, "No disciple is superior to the teacher, but when fully trained, every disciple will be like his/her teacher." That's our Lenten goal, that's our hope at this Eucharist, that we will have our hearts and minds further shaped by the Teacher and as a result we will more and more become "like the teacher."

Next week begins our Lenten journey to our baptismal waters for renewal. We will commit ourselves again to our journey in community with Christ and each other. We will acknowledge that not all that has come from our individual and communal hearts has been the goodness Jesus describes. Not all the fruit from our trees has been nourishing for our members or for others.

QUOTABLE

To date, Catholics have not made many significant contributions to a theology of

preaching, but the sacramental heritage can offer a number of rich resources and alternative perspectives in the contemporary ecumenical search for a more vital preaching of the gospel.

Some of the more central theological convictions within the sacramental imagination that have distinct implications for the preaching ministry include: the goodness and redemption of creation, an incarnational Christology, the presence and actions of the Holy Spirit in the community of the church, the transformation of humanity by grace, the role of human cooperation in the process of salvation, and the relationship between word and sacrament.

-----Catherine Hilbert, O.P. NAMING GRACE: PREACHING AND THE SACRAMENTAL IMAGINATION. New York: Continuum, 1997. (p. 17)