

## **FIRST IMPRESSIONS 16<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY (A)**

Wisdom 12: 13, 16-19 Psalm 86 Rom 8: 26-27 Matthew 13: 24-30

Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Last week a large group of runners gathered on the edge of my current hometown, Raleigh, N.C. It was early in the morning and I was getting a ride to the airport. We had to slow down because of all the people gathering on the roadside and overflowing onto the road. We wondered what the reason was for all those folks being out at 7am on a Saturday morning. Then we noticed the pink ribbons and pink T-shirts and we both said simultaneously, “breast cancer.” The pink ribbons signaled a clear message to us and told us what had gathered all these people in one spot.

We tried to remember when people first started wearing ribbons in support of special causes. I remember in the early 80's during the Iranian hostage crisis people wore yellow ribbons and tied them to trees and lamp posts as signs of solidarity with the hostages and their families. There were no words written on the ribbons, but we knew what they meant. We wanted the 52 hostages home safe. The ribbons told their families that we were sharing some of their pain, frustration and anxiety. Since then we have worn or seen ribbons for other causes: AIDS awareness, support of our troops, substance abuse, Alzheimer’s disease, etc. Despite our differences in other areas of life, wearing a particular ribbon can be a sign of solidarity and support.

I think the parables are a kind of ribbon for us Christians. They address and remind us of circumstances of need and they unite us in hope. Despite our many differences, they can keep us focused—they link us to one another. We are a “parable people.” Parables inspire us and give us vision we wouldn’t have on our own. They encourage us in our daily struggles. Like the people who wear colored ribbons, we “wear” or carry parables in our hearts and thus profess: “Despite the way the world is, this is the way I look at life.” “This is what links me to other people.” “This is what keeps me going.”

Today we have the parable of the weeds and the wheat—and we need it. We tune in sports events and ask, “Who’s winning?” We also tune in the world around us through tv, newspapers, radio and now internet coverage and are tempted to ask the

same question, “Who’s winning...Good or Evil?” ... “The decent people of the world or the violators of innocence?” The twentieth century was the most brutal in the history of the world. Aren’t things supposed to be improving as we advance as a people? It gets discouraging, the evidence mounts against optimism. We tend to want give up on the world and wonder where God is in it all.

Which is why we need to look at the parables and, in particular, today’s parable about weeds and wheat. The early church, the recipients of Matthew’s gospel, had to face the mystery of wickedness too. Why is there evil in the world, in the church and in our own hearts? That’s a very big question and this parable doesn’t give an easy answer. It doesn’t explain it at all! But neither does it ignore the problem of evil in our midst. The owner of the field says it quite plainly, “I see an enemy’s hand in this.” This is not a naive or other-worldly parable. It faces the facts: wickedness is very real, it can’t be ignored. It is not an illusion and, like the weeds in the midst of healthy plants, evil drains human life of its vitality and dedication.

We see the weeds, not just in the world out there, but “up close and personal.” The parable spoke to an early church that had its divisions, arguments and wickedness—why else would they have saved the parable? Our own congregations also have “issues.” Sometimes they feel like they will split us in two----and sometimes they do. Our faith communities have been rocked by clergy scandal; divided along ethnic and racial lines; between original members and newcomers; between traditionalists and those who want to update. While we are at it, we look into our hearts and examine our own conduct. Weeds are part of the landscape of our personal spiritual field as well.

Such vistas of evil, so obvious to us, make us want to get about the business of ripping out the weeds. They are the work of the enemy, we say and we want to purge evil from our country, church and our own hearts. Of course we have standards to guide us and there are times we must act decisively against the evil we perceive. Yet, the parable cautions us and it advises us about the dangers of rushing to judgment. We could destroy what is good in our attempts to rid the world of the bad. Jesus knew from his own experience that you can’t always tell from initial signs how things are going to turn out.

In the beginning Judas showed promise, early initiative and administrative skills--- he was in charge of the purse. He seemed like excellent disciple material, a “keeper.” If you were Jesus, wouldn’t you have thought about eliminating Peter,

Thomas or Martha? They didn't show initial signs of discernment and understanding of what following Jesus would entail. They were slow to catch on to Jesus' message. But Jesus was patient, he let the good work itself out in their lives. He gave them a chance to grow and bear fruit.

Have you ever had a friend whom you disliked upon first meeting, yet, over time, he or she turned out to be your best friend? The parable says, "You never know." The parable is a story of grace for us. As we look into our own lives and recall the mistakes we have made and the wrongs we have done, aren't we glad we have had some time to change and work things out? Aren't we thankful we had the space to let the wheat grow and bear the rich harvest it has? Suppose we had been judged on the spot. Suppose God moved in quickly to judge and rip up?

If we look at our present lives, we can still see what looks like weeds. Rather than being overcome by discouragement, we hear this parable of hope. Time is being given us, to let the good seed planted in us bear its fruit. We can trust the Owner knows what to do, and we can have trust in the outcome. This is a parable of confidence. God is in charge and will help us work things out. We don't give up the struggle to do what is right, even when we feel dismayed at how much still needs to be done.

Parables, like pieces of ribbon, don't look powerful----a piece of cloth--- a story. But they have power to touch us deeply. One symbolizes our unity through an exterior sign. The other gathers our faith and asks us to put trust in it—especially to trust the One who is telling us the parable right now. We wear the parable on our hearts; the way people wear ribbons---as a reminder. When the world confounds us and evidence seems to mount against our hopes, we look inside ourselves and see today's parable. We play it back so we can hear it again. It reassures us. We repeat it in our assemblies to stir us to action: to return to the struggle; to ignore the odds; to stop counting wins and losses—mostly, not to count our losses! In our struggle against evil, we keep at it, till Someone in charge sends word that it is time for the harvest; till Someone, who knows better than we how to do the sorting, gets around to it.

The parable links us together here at our assembly. It stirs us hope in us. We are not dismayed by what still needs doing. There is no doubt in the story: the Owner is in charge. The Owner planted good seed and it is growing towards fruition and there will be a sorting-out—but later, under Someone else's supervision. Meanwhile, we

still have time to let what is good grow in our lives. What time is it? The parable says, "There's still time, hang in there!" Thank God!

## QUOTABLE

Certainly revitalizing preaching should be at the top of the synod's agenda. Too many of the faithful feel unenlightened and undernourished by what they hear each week from the pulpit. Nothing could strengthen the liturgy and give new vitality to the Catholic community as much as biblically rooted preaching. Another development that could greatly enrich the spiritual lives of the people as well as of the clergy, the *Instrumentum Laboris* points out, is the practice of *lectio divina*. This ancient form of prayer can contribute not only to personal appropriation of Scripture but also to spiritual conversation among parishioners and members of lay and religious communities, and so lead to greater unity in the faith community.

----from "Synod on the Word of God," an editorial in AMERICA magazine (July 7-14, 2008, page 5) which comments on the upcoming Synod of Bishops in October

## JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

***"The Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness: for we do not know how to pray as we ought...." (Romans 8:26)***

Striving to live the life of peace and justice of the Gospel will also call us to a deeper life of prayer.

**"Our social ministry must be anchored in prayer, where we uncover the depths of God's call to seek justice and pursue peace."**

**(US Catholic Bishops: Communities of Salt and Light)**

*"Entering into contemplative prayer is like entering into the Eucharistic liturgy: we "gather up" the heart, recollect our whole being under the prompting of the Holy Spirit, abide in the dwelling place of the Lord which we are, awaken our faith in order to enter into the presence of him who awaits us. We let our masks fall and turn our hearts back to the Lord who loves us."*

*"Contemplative prayer is the prayer of the child of God, of the forgiven sinner who agrees to welcome the love by which he is loved and who wants to respond to it by loving even more."*

*"Contemplative prayer is the simplest expression of the mystery of prayer. In it the Father strengthens our inner being with power through his Spirit "that Christ may dwell in [our] hearts through faith" and we may be "grounded in love."*

“Contemplative prayer is *hearing* the Word of God. Far from being passive, such attentiveness is the obedience of faith, the unconditional acceptance of a servant, and the loving commitment of a child. It participates in the "Yes" of the Son become servant and the *Fiat* of God's lowly handmaid.”(#2709-#2719 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*)

***Centering Prayer*** is one very simple *method* of prayer, which prepares us to receive the gift of God's presence, traditionally called contemplative prayer.

**Lectio Divina** (Prayerful reading of Sacred Scripture) is another method of prayer which leads into a more contemplative awareness of God's Presence and opens us to the powerful working of God's Spirit, praying within us.

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

## POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

**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." *If the inmate responds, you might consider becoming pen pals.***

Please write to:.....

Christopher Roseboro                      #0352024    (On death row since 8/29/97)

Roger Blakeney                      #0033802    (9/10/97)

Marcos Mitchell                      #0488288    (11/4/97)

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

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. Two new CDs Available: **“FIRST IMPRESSIONS PREACHING REFLECTIONS”**

**“Liturgical year A,”** which begins in Advent and contains **three** reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts for the year. It also has book reviews and additional essays related to preaching.

**“Liturgical years, A, B and C,”** reflections on the three-year cycle.

If you are a preacher, lead a Lectionary-based scripture group, or are a member of a liturgical team, these CDs will be helpful in your preparation process. Individual worshipers report they also use these reflections as they prepare for Sunday liturgy.

You can order the CDs by going to our webpage: [www.preacherexchange.com](http://www.preacherexchange.com) and clicking on the "First Impressions" CDs link on the left.

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. (Judeop@Juno.com)

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

Where you will find "Preachers' Exchange," which includes "First Impressions" and "Homilias Dominicales," as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.

4. "Homilias Dominicales"-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Jose David Padilla, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like "First Impressions", "Homilias Dominicales" are a preacher's early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive "Homilias Dominicales" drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: [Jboll@opsouth.org](mailto:Jboll@opsouth.org) or [jboll@preacherexchange.org](mailto:jboll@preacherexchange.org)

5. "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.

## **DONATIONS**

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA

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