

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 25th SUNDAY (A)

Isaiah 55: 6-9 Psalm 145 Philippians 1: 20c-24, 27a Matthew 20: 1-16

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

As an itinerant preacher I get to see a lot of towns and cities around the country. There are features that separate one from another and make them distinct –skylines, rivers, bays, foliage, racial and ethnic blends, size, etc. Other features are found in all of them – chain stores, restaurants, banks, churches, stadiums, traffic signals, etc. No matter what part of the country I travel to, these population centers have something else in common – the sight of day laborers along the side streets and at the entrance to malls. In the cities the locals usually know where to find these workers who line up and hope for a day’s work. People hire them for handy work around their homes, construction jobs, assembly lines. The crack down on immigrants has made the situation of these laborers more precarious; but still, as you drive into a town, there they are, in small clumps waiting for someone to drive up and hire them.

We hear that some of these workers are taken advantage of; they work in unhealthy conditions for long hours, low wages and, even when they have done their work, some get reported to the immigration agents to be carted off without their pay. Day laborers face uncertainty and risk. They have little security and a lot of anxiety about earning enough to feed their families, pay the rent and other necessities of daily life.

You don’t have to be a day laborer to have financial worries, especially these days in our uncertain economy. People at the lower end of the pay scale know how even a brief interruption in work can be a hardship for themselves and their families. When you don’t make a lot of money, you can’t afford to lose even a day of work, a day’s pay. It might make the difference between getting a necessary prescription filled on time, having a medical procedure done – or not. But these days financial insecurity has even stretched to the middle end of the scale as people face mortgage crises, job insecurity and ever-rising energy bills. How many people in the northern states are worried about the approach of winter and whether or not they will be able to pay for sufficient heating fuel for their homes? Even the major industries are struggling, feeling financial uncertainty and laying off workers – the three major American car manufacturers, the airlines, etc. None of us, young or old, is immune

from financial insecurity and anxieties in our workplaces.

Multiply these fears about job security by 100 and you get some sense of what it must have been like to be a day laborer in Jesus' time. Poverty was severe, over 95% of the people were desperately poor and on the verge of starvation. For many, a day's wage was the difference between having something to eat – and not. Each morning the day laborers would have had that empty feeling, the wave of anxiety, race through them as they pondered, "Suppose I don't get work today? How will I feed the kids?" Even the youngest and most physically fit, the ones most likely to get work, would know this fear. Most likely, they would be the ones chosen first – if there were work. But suppose there was no work, even the most likely to get hired, would not.

Multiply and compound these fears by still another 100 if you were elderly, a widow with children, a child laborer, injured or disabled. You wouldn't be the first hired, or even the second or third – others would be more likely to get work for the day. But you would still need a day's pay to live on and to feed your family. A day's pay could make the difference between eating and going hungry; living and dying. Would you rather be those who worked a whole day or those who stood around, waiting and despairing for yourself and your family, hoping to get hired – with your hopes sinking as the day wore on? Even if you got hired later in the day, what good would that do since you would receive less than a day's pay?

The landowner was accustomed to hiring harvest workers. He would know all this from experience. Some employers don't notice their employees' needs. But this parable tells of a different kind of employer – a most rare employer indeed! This one noticed and cared for those he saw who needed work. And he was extravagant!

The parable certainly rubs us the wrong way. Somehow we equate ourselves with people in the first situation who were hired first. We have worked hard, they way we have been taught by our hard working parents and grandparents. We carry over the training and sense of justice we were taught by our forebears and apply them to God. We have worked hard, have earned and have a right to God's payment, we reason. That's just what is just – we reason.

We need to pause here with our sense of indignation and feelings about not being treated "justly" by God. After all we are dealing with a God who knows it all. Do we really want a strict accounting of everything we have thought, said and done?

We'd be infinitely better off by taking what is being offered by the One who is self-described as "Generous."

Wait a minute, this is a parable and it is not so much about us and what we deserve, as it is about God! It's about the reign of God and that means the accounting system is like nothing we have ever experienced in our hard-working lives. This parable and others, is about a big and welcoming God, who doesn't make us feel like 2nd class or inferior servants. We have heard enough parables to draw a conclusion about God: our God takes outsiders and makes them insiders; our God doesn't treat us according to our standards, but according to God's. And the measuring rod God uses is spelled out in today's parable – Generosity.

Each of us needs forgiveness and it is generously given us; whether we thought we deserved it or not. Some of us need, at this point in our lives, courage, perseverance or relief. We feel in need, but may conclude we don't deserve a lot from God. But, as we hear today, the One in charge wants to be generous, beyond what we think we should receive. We may not feel we have done enough for God to earn a favorable hearing; that we don't deserve God's attention. That's what we might say, but God says, "Nonsense, come right in, you are welcome. I am feeling generous!"

A question: then what does God require from us? Well, if we believe in the God of this parable, who welcomes us and is so generous, then we have to reflect this generosity in our lives. We have to stop keeping strict accounts. We must stop measuring people by how much they have; how educated they are; how long they have been coming to our church; how "worthy" we think they are. We need to put on the eyeglasses today's parable provides and see ourselves and others as God sees us.

[Remember that we had a series on immigration by Chuck Dahmn, OP last Advent. If you wish more about this topic go to those reflections on our webpage at: http://www.judeop.org/advent_2007.htm]

FAITH BOOK

Mini-reflections on the Sunday scripture readings designed for persons on the run. "Faith Book" is also brief enough to be posted in the Sunday parish bulletins people take home.

From today's Gospel reading:

My friend...what if I wish to give this last one the same as you?

Or am I not free to do as I wish with my own money?

Are you envious because I am generous?
Thus, the last will be first, and the first will be last.

Reflection:

Each of us stands in need before God. Some are looking for forgiveness; others for healing from past injuries. At this point in our lives some of us need courage, perseverance, hope or relief. We are like the day laborers, we stand in need and hope we are chosen. The One in charge has noticed us and wants to be generous, beyond what we think we should receive. Our best response to God's generosity is gratitude and the desire to be generous to others in similar need.

So we ask ourselves:

How aware am I of God's generosity to me in my life?

Can I name some gifts I have received from God that I am sure I didn't earn or deserve?

To whom must I be as generous?

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

"Only conduct yourselves in a way worthy of the gospel of Christ."

Philippians 1:27a

"Christians will want to favor ways of life that decisively break with the frenzy of consumerism, exhausting and joyless. We must find a simple way of living." (Pope John Paul II)

"We live in a culture that worships the marketplace. Market worship is the most prevalent form of idolatry in our culture today." (Collins & Wright, *The Moral Measure of the Economy*)

"Consumer choices and consumer demands are moral and cultural expressions of how we conceive of life. What and how much we consume manifest our conception of who we are and why we exist. The spiritual and cultural impoverishment that are the natural by-products of consumerism are evident everywhere" (*The Good Life from a Catholic Perspective: The Problem of Consumption*)
<http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/ejp/background/articles/consumption.shtml>

"We've become a nation of consumers rather than citizens. In a consumer society, personal worth is determined by what you have, how much you have, and your ability to get more. *Having* replaces *being*. In the U.S. we're living on an island of affluence surrounded by an ocean of misery." (*Father Bryan Massingale in an interview with US Catholic*)

Did you know?

Each year Americans spend \$12 billion on video rentals, \$33 billion in weight loss. \$22 billion on cosmetic products, \$110 billion on fast food and \$600 billion on new and used cars.

On average, people in the United States spend 6 hours shopping per week and only 40 minutes playing with their children.

By the age of 20, the average person in the United States has seen one million commercials.

How do we begin to simplify our lives?

“Even before we take measures such as cutting consumption, carrying less debt, or spending more time with family and friends, *we need to examine what matters most to us*. Periods of silence can lead us closer to that discovery. Even 10 minutes a day can help us learn more about our true selves--what we personally need, what is missing in our lives, and what drives us to fill those holes with things that never can really satisfy.” (*Sister Joan Chittister*)

Can we find 10 minutes of quiet time with God each day?

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

QUOTABLE

We are grateful, too, that many women possess leadership and organizational skills which, although often underutilized in the past, are now coming to the fore. We urge pastors to recognize and to continue to call forth the distinct contributions that women can make to the Church and to the world. Diversity of gifts in the service of Christ is not to be feared or suppressed but recognized as a sign of the Church's vitality and ongoing renewal.

----“Strengthening the Bonds of Peace: A Pastoral Reflection on Women in the Church and in Society.” National Conference of Catholic Bishops and U.S. Catholic Conference, page 10.

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:.....

Allen Holman	#0587681	(On death row since 4/7/98)
Clinton Smith	#0507433	(4/13/98)
Timmy Grooms	#0158506	(4/24/98)

---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 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 or 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

P.O. Box 12927, Raleigh, N.C. 27605, (919) 833-1893, Email: judeop@juno.com