

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 26th SUNDAY (A)

Ezekiel 18: 25-28 Psalm 25 Philippians 2: 1-11 Matthew 21: 28-32

by Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Remember index cards? I still use them and I notice some public speakers and preachers do too. Here is an index-card exercise. Think of the times people said they would do something for you – and didn't. Include the people who said they would do something, were sincere about it, but then changed their minds or, their hearts turned away from you. Remember your disappointment? Write each time on a different index card. Warning: this can be a painful exercise. Then stack the cards in front of you. Are there a lot of cards in that stack?

This will bring to mind incidents going all the way back to childhood when a friend made a promise with words and gesture, "cross my heart and hope to die." When a group of friends said they would get you through a difficult period or trial in your life and then, after initial responses, drifted away and got distracted by their own activities. A loved one dies and at the funeral home a cousin or sibling promises, "I will be there for you," and they weren't. A first date promised, but never called back and dropped off the face of the earth. I think we would have preferred outright rejections, a "No, I can't do that for you," is much more honest than a "Yes," that turns out to be a "No."

When someone we trust or seems honest, gives us a "Yes" and doesn't follow through, we get blind sided. We are caught off guard and are vulnerable, since we invested ourselves in their initial "Yes." We thought we could fall back on their word; that we could rely on them when we needed them, but they never showed up; never even followed through to tell us why they weren't there for us when we needed them. "But you said...", we want to protest. They aren't there to hear our disappointment.

There are some very serious moments in life when a person has given a "Yes" with solemnity and profundity. That kind of "Yes" is so serious it is placed in the context of a ceremony. Someone promises to love and be there in "good times in bad, in sickness and in death, till death do us part." But we come to discover that, even with all those words and ritual, the "Yes" was an empty one. Or, it was half-hearted. Or, after a while, a heart chilled, turned away and the "Yes" became a "No."

How could we not be affected till this present moment by those disappointments? As we look at the index cards of empty promises, who would blame us for locking our heart in a box – locking it up and never again giving it away or entrusting it to another's promise? We look on those index cards with heavy hearts, scarred by the disappointments they represent.

But we need to also acknowledge the times we too have said our "Yes" – and not followed through. Our "Yes" has become a "No." Do we remember? Should we write those occasions on another stack of cards to examine them and reflect on the effects those unfulfilled promises have had on others? We tried to please someone and said "Yes," but meant "No." We said "Yes," to avoid a confrontation – we were less than honest. We too gave our share of half-hearted "yeses." People thought they heard commitment behind our "Yes," but our heart wasn't in it and it never left home; it stayed back in fear or indifference. Those who trusted our "Yes" were disappointed.

Those of us who took vows, may have become less than committed, while not unfaithful, still not given a whole-hearted and responsive "Yes." We may have taken another for granted; let things slide; become unwilling to invest ourselves again when the going got tough.

Through our baptism and the subsequent renewals of our baptismal promises, we have said our "Yes" to Jesus many times. But has that "Yes" now become a "No?" Have our religious practices become merely ritualistic? Do we give the impression of being committed to our faith – but we know better. We may just be following the routine made firm by years of repetition. Our hearts aren't really in it; our "Yes," truth be told, is really a "No." We suspect that if we wanted to make an authentic "Yes" to Christ and his service, we would have to make some serious changes in our lives and we have decided not to do that.

We might be well aware of our deep-down resistance to God. We may be like people who go to a twelve-step program, listen to the witness of people who have been helped; hear what will be required of us to make a similar change, and decide to just go along pretending to what is not true – our words don't measure up to the reality of our actions. We say a public "Yes," but we know our hearts aren't in it.

To this Eucharist we bring both stacks of index cards. We bring our hearts that have been wounded by the disappointments and betrayals we have experienced in our

lives. We bring the hurts caused by promises made to us, that went unfulfilled. We ask for healing, so that our hearts, once hardened by betrayals great and small, might be softened by the Christ who is present to us in this sacrament and who knows himself the wounds of betrayal caused by those closest to him. We ask for healing.

We also ask for forgiveness for those we have disappointed with our empty or half-hearted “Yeses.” They put trust in us, perhaps at their most vulnerable times, and we did not follow through and were not there when we promised we would be. What I find interesting in today’s parable is that there is no mention in it of how things turned out. How hard of a worker was the first son when he finally got to the vineyard to work? Did he meet his quota; do what was expected of him? There are no standards of measurements laid out for us in this story. The emphasis is just on someone who changed his mind; who in the end, responded to an invitation. Maybe that is what is pleasing to God: our desire to serve; our attempts to respond –while we leave plenty of room for God to step in and fill in the gaps. The big ones and the small ones.

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:

A man had two sons. He came to the first and said, “Son go out and work in the vineyard today.” He said in reply, “I will not,” but afterwards changed his mind and went.

The man came to the other son and gave the same order. He said in reply, “Yes, sir,” but did not go.

Which of the two did his father’s will?”

They answered, “The first.”

Reflection:

Did you notice in today’s parable there is no mention of how things turned out when the first son changed his mind and went into the vineyard? How hard of a worker was he when he finally got to the vineyard to work?

Did he do what was expected of him? There are no standards or measurements of success laid out for us in this story. The emphasis is just on someone who changed

his mind; who in the end, responded to an invitation.

Maybe that is what is pleasing to God: our desire to serve and our attempts, if at times feeble, to respond –while we leave plenty of room for God to step in and fill in the gaps. The big ones and the small ones.

So we ask ourselves:

Shall we pray today for healing from past hurts caused by those who lied to us or disappointed us?

And shall we ask for the ability to forgive them?

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

"Thus says the Lord: Is it my way that is unfair, or rather, are not your ways unfair?"(Ezekiel 18:25)

"We believe that water not only is a consumer good, but a good to which all human beings have a right, even if they don't have money." *(Pope John Paul II)*

More than 2.6 billion people – forty per cent of the world's population – lack basic sanitation facilities, and over one billion people still use unsafe drinking water sources. As a result, thousands of children die every day from diarrhea and other water-, sanitation- and hygiene-related diseases and many more suffer and are weakened by illness.

Children – and particularly girls – are denied their right to education because they are busy fetching water or are deterred by the lack of separate and decent sanitation facilities in schools. Without safe water and sanitation, sustainable development is impossible.

Paul Simon Water for the Poor Act 2005

"On June 1, 2006, the Department of State submitted to Congress its initial report on water issues in developing countries under the Paul Simon Water for the Poor Act. This report, available through the link below, marks the beginning of a long-term process to develop and implement a strategy to strengthen U.S. efforts on international water issues.

The Act, which was signed into law by President Bush on December 1, 2005, makes access to safe water and sanitation for developing countries a specific policy objective of U.S. foreign assistance programs. www.state.gov/g/oes/water/

Did you know?

One out of every six people worldwide lacks access to safe drinking water, while the average American uses **100 gallons** of water every day.

The richest fifth of the world's people (that's us) consumes 86 percent of all goods and services, while the poorest fifth consumes just 1.3 percent.

Two million people - most of them children - die each year from waterborne disease.

A growing number of local families are having their water shut off because they cannot afford the cost.

What I can do:

1. Pray for those who have no clean water and **lobby against the movement to "privatize" water** in the developing world.
2. Thank God for our abundance when you turn on your faucet.
3. Be glad and let your congress person know that you are proud of what the United States is doing to make access to safe water fairer for the world's poor.

(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:.....

Carlette Parker #0311386 (On death row since 4/1/99)

Nathaniel Fair #0125241 (5/18/99)

Eric Call #0542384 (5/22/99)

---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 worshippers 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

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