

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 31ST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A)
Malachi 1: 14b–2:2b, 8-10 1 Thessalonians 2: 7b–9, 13 Matthew 23: 1-12
Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

In the neighborhood I grew up in a lot of the kids had nick names. A "John" was a Jack or Jay; a last name like Smith got called Smithy; of course, a Geraldine was a Gerry and an Elizabeth became Beth. Those were natural derivatives, easily tied into the owner's birth names. But there were other names that weren't so naturally associated with the owner's name, but were from a characteristic perceived by others in the gang. Some of these names were demeaning. There were "fatso" and "skinny"; there were "shorty" and "four eyes."

Names really form us, they even affect how people relate to us. (I read somewhere that people with names that are considered attractive, do better in their lives.) The name "Pharisee" conjures up a lot for us who read the Gospel stories. It's a shame in a way, because not all the Pharisees were the trouble makers they are usually depicted as being. Among the Pharisees were honest seekers and some were even friendly with Jesus. But most frequently their presence in a Gospel story spells trouble. They get Jesus' harshest criticisms thrown at them. When a sinner or someone in need comes to Jesus, He is always compassionate towards them. His words always invite them to forgiveness and healing. But if you want to find places in the Gospels where he sounds harsh or angry, then chances are you will find it in an encounter with one or more of the Pharisees. They just didn't come to him with the same open attitude as honest seekers. That's what's happening in today's Gospel story.

The Gospel hits very close to home to those of us who are in full time church ministry. It is immediately obvious that Jesus is referring to people with religious titles, those publically extolled because of their office as religious teachers and leaders. They bore titles like, Rabbi, Teacher or Father. Now titles and offices are important in any structured society. But the title is not the measure of the person who bears it. In fact, Jesus is saying that even religious figures, like the Pharisees and scribes, legitimate heirs to the teaching of Moses, are not always worthy of these titles. While the Pharisees bore titles of respect from devoted followers, there were Pharisees who didn't live lives befitting these titles. Jesus accuses them of not practicing what they preached. They worked out laws and observances that were burdensome to the vast majority of ordinary people, but they also worked out clever loopholes to these laws so that they wouldn't apply to themselves.

Jesus' accusations make all of us who bear public office in religious congregations, those of us who have religious titles such as "bishop," "father," "sister," "preacher"---very uncomfortable. We need to examine our lives to see if we are guilty of being "pharisaical" in our roles of leadership and responsibility. Are we living the lives we publically profess? There's room for change in each us, and need for God's mercy as we confess the ways we have not lived up to our responsibilities.

But none of us is let off the hook in any scripture story. Each story speaks to us in our own situation and life circumstances. This story, with its call to consistency in what we say

publically about faith and how we live it, is no exception. Remember, the Pharisees were lay people. They were from the middle class and were basically good-intentioned people who wanted to pass on the beauty and the purity of the religion they inherited from Moses. They were conscientious in trying to uphold the law and they were open to ideas about how their faith could be lived in changing times and different places.

We cannot hear the indictment made against them by Jesus without squirming in our pews. Whether we have an official title in our congregation or not, each of us bears some responsibility, each of us teaches others about God by our words or actions. Some of us are called mothers, fathers, teachers; others are called neighbor, friend, grandmother or grandfather, aunt or uncle. We are usually careful about how we speak, what we teach others, especially young people. But our daily actions, and patterns of behavior probably communicate the real message of what we profess to others. Are we consistent in what we say and do? Or are we "pharisaical"? In everything we say and do, remember "Someone is watching." Maybe that "someone" is a child at home, or a fellow employee or a friend.

Do you like the sound of the alarm clock in the morning? I don't, I hate it! But I still set the alarm at night, even though I know how harsh it will sound the next morning. That's because I want to be awake the next day in time to address responsibilities, work, and appointments. Or I set the alarm because I've got something to do that I don't want to miss, that I'm looking forward to--a get-together with a friend or just some extra time to be with the family.

Jesus' words are addressed to us today. "WE are all Pharisees" in one way or another. They sound harsh and jarring, but like an alarm clock, his words might wake us from our sleep; call attention to something we've been avoiding, at our own peril. How do our actions measure up to our words? How do our words about our beliefs enter into the reality of our daily lives? And those of us who are in positions of responsibility for the training and teaching others religious values, such as pastoral people, bible school teachers, parents, etc, ---have we been faithful transmitters of the faith handed on to us? None of us is perfect, "We are all Pharisees." That's why Jesus' words are a wake up call to us today. A call to reflection, and self evaluation.

When we realize his words are addressed to us we also realize that what lies behind his words is the mercy of God. After all, we don't hear his words as outsiders, listening in on a conversation meant for others from the past. Rather, we hear him as people who have entered into his world, we dwell within the circle of those who hear his words, confess our own need for forgiveness and experience the mercy of the one Jesus calls in this passage, the "one Father in Heaven."

While we do respect others, it's not for the titles they bear but the lives they live. When you come right down to it, we don't really need to carry around names that demeaned us as children, whatever their source. Nor do we need to live off the glory titles bestow on us. Jesus rejects lives based merely on titles and names. The reality underlying all others is that he has given us a new name. He has called us "friend" and this name gives us a new identity more important than the ones mere titles give us. Having experienced the mercy of God, we can live faithful to this new name, feeling the difference it makes. We experience healing when we come to know that old names can be put aside and that titles carry no weight before God. We live with a new name

and identity: we are Friends of Jesus and thus called friends by God.

What difference this new name makes in our lives. To be called Friend of God helps us to become more and more that friend. And our new identity, not based on human merit or achievement, but given to us by Jesus, helps us to see others as bearing the same name, "Friend of God." If we believe that God sees others in this way, maybe we can also put aside the titles we carry around for them, titles and names based on race, or on their achievements; names based merely on their educational level, or physical appearances. Think of all the names we carry for people---- all the ways we judge them, name them and box them in.

What would happen if we could put those aside and see them as another Friend of God?

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

Foley, Edward. Preaching Basics. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1998.

A workbook designed to develop the model and method of liturgical preaching outlined in the bishops' document, Fulfilled in Your Hearing. Presents a day by day method for preparing the Sunday preaching. Though it focuses on the ordained preacher and the Sunday Eucharistic liturgy, this workbook has basics for all preachers.

QUOTABLE:

"Passion for the liturgy. This preaching is not simply IN the liturgy or AT the liturgy. It IS the liturgy. The preacher's passion for the liturgy translates into an authentic commitment to public worship as the font and summit of both ecclesial and personal life. This is where we discover and rehearse our vocation in the church and commitment to the world. The whole of the liturgy informs our preaching and must be embraced wholeheartedly for the sake of such preaching."
----page 1, Foley.

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

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