

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 6TH SUNDAY OF EASTER
Acts 8: 5-8, 14-17 1 Peter 3: 15-18 John 14: 15-21
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

During the forty years of their marriage, a professional couple used to exchange gifts of jewelry on their anniversary. As the years went by and they earned more money, the gifts became more and more valuable---rings, bracelets, pins, cuff links, watches, etc. He died first and then, though she was in excellent health, she died suddenly. Though both had been careful in making out their wills, neither thought to spell out how the jewelry should be dispersed among their four children. A squabble broke out among the children over which child was to get which valuable piece of jewelry.

Jesus is about to pass to God, and he is concerned for the disciples' wellbeing; how will they get along without him? In addition, they are in need of consolation in the light of what he is telling them about his departure. They won't have him with them in the same way; he won't be there when they need encouragement, prodding, advice or comfort during difficult times. Today's gospel is part of his farewell speech and reflects his awareness of what is about to happen to him and his concern for those he is leaving behind. This is his last will and testament, and he wants to leave them something of great value; but not an inheritance that will rust, wear out, get stolen, cause a squabble, or be irrelevant for future generations of believers. He wants, in a manner of speaking, to leave his descendants the family jewel, the pearl of great price, the unfailing treasure. He is like the parent providing for the children's future wellbeing; he is giving them something that will remind them of him, help them to grow together, but also get them through difficult times. He has been the first Advocate for the disciples, and he promises to send them "another Advocate."

First, he instructs them: "keep my commandments." That will be the memorial they will raise in his honor after he is gone---not a tombstone, granite monument, wall mural or triumphant arch. Not

even a grand cathedral can be as eloquent a testimony of our love for him. Very simply, before they set about forming a building committee, he wants them to show reverence for him by keeping his commandments. Which commandments? Let's do a little background and then approach this question.

The dictionary defines "advocate" as one who, speaks in favor of, or recommends; one who argues a cause; a supporter or defender; one who pleads in another's behalf. It is derived from the Latin, "advocatus," ---one summoned to give evidence, called to stand alongside one, like a defense attorney. Raymond Brown (*Once and Coming Spirit at Pentecost*, p. 73) says there is another role for the "one called alongside." For those who suffer or are lonely, the Advocate (Paraclete) will be a comforter and consoler. John's gospel has a major emphasis on the Paraclete's being the likeness of the Lord and so in Jesus' absent, the Paraclete/ Advocate will be the substitute for Jesus to the disciples. (Brown says this is why the Spirit cannot come until Jesus departs.)

Some have a rather harsh image of God. They envision a distant God, ruling over everything and everyone from an on-high vantage. This God is a ruler and tester, expecting us to live up to a set of regulations and requiring us to pass the "final exam" which weighs our accomplishments against our transgressions. In this perception, Jesus' role was crucial: to go before God and assuage God's anger over our sins. God was deeply offended by our sin and Jesus was our Advocate before a fearsome God. We needed him to get us on the straight and narrow and die to appease an angry God. God and the Son are kind of like a "good cop, bad cop" duo. Jesus is our "good cop" persuading us in a nice tone of voice to change our lives. If we don't, we get the "bad cop" who will shout, pound the desk, threaten us with punishment and scare us to reform. In this perspective of our situation before God, the Advocate is seen as our ongoing intercessor before the throne of God. In other words, the Advocate becomes our next lawyer after Jesus leaves, our defense attorney before the throne of the Judge. Scratch the surface and we will find that in the way some speak about God and

how they pray---- a lot of people in our congregations still hold these notions of God. Another perspective is necessary, one that fulfills the hope Jesus has for us in the gospel, especially in this last discourse section in John's gospel (chapters 14-17). There he promises to take us to a place of intimate union with God.

Maybe we need the Advocate, not to argue our case to God, but to argue God's case to us. The Advocate Jesus will send his followers, will intercede on God's behalf and remind us of God's love for us and help us live Jesus' way of love for others. The Advocate will persuade us and enable us to do what Jesus tells his disciples, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." Jesus' commandments are about love; we are asked to love as he loved. At the table he had just demonstrated this love by his washing the disciples' feet; he will further demonstrate his self-giving love the next day by giving his life on their behalf. Such love will require an enormous greatness of spirit and persevering commitment.

The disciples will no longer have Jesus by their side showing them how to live his love in all the complex circumstances they have yet to face. He won't be there in the same way he was for them, encouraging them when loving gets difficult and tiring. So, rather than leave them on their own he will send them the Advocate to keep them freshly aware of his life and teaching. With the Advocate they will not have to rely on their limited memory of the past-Jesus. Instead, the Advocate will stand by their side and be a living presence ever responsive to the new situations Jesus' disciples will face. The Advocate will also reassure them that they already have a hearing before God; will even encourage them to turn to God in trusting and faithful prayer. When they are in dire straits, either through their inability and fatigue in loving as Jesus commanded; or when their guilt and fear make them feel unworthy to pray, the Advocate will be there to reassure, strengthen and assure them that their prayer is heard, God is attentive to all their half-formed prayers.

As our church reels from scandal, we have special need for the

Advocate's presence by our side. We need Someone in whom we can place our trust. Jesus names the Advocate "the Spirit of truth." In this Spirit we struggle to hear what truth needs to be followed and spoken in this mess our community is facing. We invite the Advocate's presence today upon the gifts we place on our altar, to transform them into the life-giving food of Christ's presence in the midst of our aching church. We also pray that the Spirit will come upon our church to transform us more and more into the body of Christ,---we who are not yet fully faithful to his commandments of love; not yet fully whole and integrated. These days battered and struggling, we pray for the healing of all those harmed by the sickness and crimes of our past and present. We pray too in this breaking-open-time that we have the courage to face the truth and make whatever changes we must make in our church. We are encouraged this day in Jesus' promise that we are not left as orphans. We need a loving and strong parental hand to guide us on our path to become the community that faithfully reflects Christ's loving and caring presence in the world.

In almost every verse of today's gospel passage Jesus assures us that we will not be left on our own---"another Advocate to be with you always"... "You are in me and I in you"... "reveal myself to him/her." Jesus is just like a mother giving last orders to her children before she leaves the house ("no fighting, go to bed on time, wash your dishes, not too much television, do your homework, etc."). A person's last words before parting usually sum up the essentials. These are Jesus' last words, and he repeats himself because he wants to make a point, "No matter how bad it gets or how severely you mess up remember, I will not abandon you."

READER'S RESPONSE

(to last week's 5^{th.s} Sunday of Easter's reflections)
Seems to me there may be another dimension to this promise of Jesus. And that is permission! We have far more permission than we have ever dreamed about! Permission to doubt and yes, permission to sin - but don't go away, come back and we will be

taught by this sinning. This is what the Eucharist is for - to sustain us while we are sinning, not as a reward for an imaginary purity or orthodoxy. (Otherwise Jesus would have given it to the Pharisees, not to "sinners".) Especially not to be withheld as a punishment for sinning! Or to be withheld from those on the margins or outside of the Church because they - it's obvious, isn't it? - are not members of the elect - or is that elite? We always come to it with soiled feet - the more soiled, the more we need it as *bread for the journey!* We have no idea what unconditional love means. This kind of permission allows us to grow, not bound by "rules and expectations" but as inner-directed adults. So, as Martin Luther said, "If you are going to sin, sin boldly" And count your blessings!

Regards,

Garth Stanton, St. Anselm's, Ross, CA

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Crotty, Robert and Ryan, John B. Commentaries on the Ritual Readings. New York: Pueblo Publishing Co., 1982.

Provides commentaries and homiletic applications for lectionary texts of the sacramental rites (including the rite of Communion outside of Mass). The commentaries on the readings are brief and relate to the rite, therefore, one needs to do one's own exegetical homework to accompany this book's reflections and applications.

QUOTABLE

"In the terrible midnight of war [people] have knocked on the door of the church to ask for the bread of peace, but the church has often disappointed them....In a world gone mad with arms buildup, chauvinistic passions and imperialistic exploitation, the church has either endorsed these activities or remained appallingly silent.... A weary world, pleading desperately for peace, has often found the church morally sanctioning war."

----Martin Luther King, Jr. (In his sermon, "A Knock at Midnight.")

JUSTICE NOTES

(These weekly quotes may be helpful in your preaching or may also be added to your weekly parish bulletin as a way of informing your faith community on some social issues.)

The basis for all that the Church believes about the moral dimensions of economic life is its vision of the transcendent worth -- the sacredness -- of human beings. The dignity of the human person, realized in community with others, is the criterion against which all aspects of economic life must be measured.

All human beings, therefore, are ends to be served by the institutions that make up the economy, not means to be exploited for more narrowly defined goals. Human personhood must be respected with a reverence that is religious. When we deal with each other, we should do so with the sense of awe that arises in the presence of something holy and sacred. For that is what human beings are: we are created in the image of God (Gn 1:27).

Economic Justice for All, #28

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: **“FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR A.”** The CD contains two reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of the year. In addition, there are helpful essays for preaching during the liturgical seasons (Advent, Lent, the Triduum, etc.), ten book reviews and essays on various aspects of preaching. The files are in three formats (Microsoft Word, WordPerfect and Adobe Acrobat Reader) so you should have no trouble opening them on your computer. To purchase go to: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> click on the “Year A-CD” button on the right and follow the instructions.
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 webpages: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> and <http://www.opsouth.org/> (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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