

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 15th SUNDAY (A)

Isaiah 55: 10-11 Psalm 65 Romans 8: 18-23 Matthew 13:1-23

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

“Did you get it?” That’s what we ask after we have told a joke and the punch line doesn’t get the expected laugh. Why don’t people “get it?” Well, sometimes the joke teller just can’t tell a joke. Sometimes the joke isn’t funny. But other times the listener doesn’t get the joke because he or she is from a different background, culture or generation. They are not “in” on the joke. One of the classic comedy routines is the one by Abbot and Costello called, “Who’s On First?”. The routine is about fifty years old, but I saw it again recently in a documentary about comedies and comedians. For that routine to evoke a laugh you have to be “in” on the joke, i.e., you have to know at least a little about baseball. If you don’t—“forget about it!”

Today and for two more Sundays in July, we will be focusing on the third discourse in Matthew. His gospel has five major discourses and one way to outline this gospel is around these discourses. Five discourses also suggest the five books of the Torah—another lens through which to interpret this gospel, which is rooted in Jewish themes and symbols.

Today’s passage has three parts. The parable itself (vv. 1-9); Jesus’ reason for speaking in parables (vv. 10-17) and then an interpretation of the parable (vv. 18-23). Why don’t we just look at the first two sections. The third, the allegorical interpretation, seems to have been an added-on explanation by the early Christian community. This third section could be the basis for a preaching all by itself. We will save it for another time, lest we overload today’s preaching.

I wonder if Jesus’ disciples weren’t tempted at times to filter out people in the many crowds they encountered while they were with Jesus. Why not have Jesus focus on the most likely and receptive candidates, those who looked like they were well disposed to his message? These “prime candidates” could have been invited to sit up close to Jesus, the way very frequent flyers get to move up to first class on crowded airplanes.

Instead, Jesus broadcasts his message to the crowds with their widely diverse

personalities and religious types. Jesus is reaching far and wide to convince people that God loves them and is inviting them into a new way of living; what he calls, “the kingdom of heaven.” From the way he is describing that kingdom you can tell that it isn’t restricted to the few and select. You never know who in the crowd is going to get the message---have a light go off in them that stirs them to accept the fantastic story Jesus is revealing to them.

Thus, the parable of the sower seems, first of all, to apply to Jesus and how he goes about his mission. He is speaking to the crowds and, like the sower in the parable, he has been sowing the Word freely. One might even accuse him of being too indiscriminate. Shouldn’t the sower have been more circumspect and place the seed more carefully instead of cavalierly tossing the seed hither and yon? That might make good sense for a careful and parsimonious sower. But when Jesus casts the seed of his word, he just isn’t neat. Anyone who is open to it can receive it.

Those who “hear” and “see” through the parables are receiving something they could never have gotten on their own. Jesus says they are “blessed,” they have been given the gift of seeing and hearing the wonderful mystery revealed in the parables. Today’s parable shows how mysterious God’s ways are. God reaches out, not only to the well-disposed and upright, but to the “rocky” and the “weedy” as well. All are offered God’s expansive love communicated through Jesus’ extravagant sowing of the Word. Jesus told this parable to “large crowds”—yet, from the disciples’ perspective, the response to his preaching was minimal. Why wasn’t there a mass number of dedicated disciples in response to Jesus’ sowing? Jesus’ followers must have been discouraged by the seeming small response he was getting.

The parable of the sower is complemented today by our first reading from Isaiah in which we hear the assurance that God’s Word “shall not return to me void, but shall do my will achieving the end for which I sent it.” Isaiah testifies that God’s Word in itself is fruitful, not because of any human achievement, but because it is of God, and so is powerful, alive and at work in the world. Jesus confirms what Isaiah said and offers assurance that eventually, despite the meager signs of success and his disciples’ disappointment, the harvest will be astounding and surprising. Those of us who plug away at our ministries without seeing immediate or impressive results can take heart in the parable of the sower. The word we preach and share is powerful and will eventually bear fruit.

What kind of harvest? How big a harvest? Jesus was a carpenter. The farmers

among his listeners would have thought that he knew nothing about farming since he was predicting a yield of “a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold.” Experienced farmers in Jesus’ audience wouldn’t have expected a harvest beyond seven or, at the most, tenfold. Jesus was suggesting an impossible yield. But he wasn’t talking farming; he was encouraging his disciples that, despite the seeming poor response, the eventual harvest to his word would be extraordinary. He was giving his disciples hope in the face of discouraging returns.

People doing ministry, spreading God’s Word through their words and actions, hear today’s parable and cling to the hope it offers. At times we can identify with the frustrations in the parable: the good seed gets tossed on the path and the birds eat it; it falls on rocky ground and dies for lack of roots and the seed gets choked by thorns. How discouraging to hardworking ministers who would be helped if they saw concrete results—sooner, rather than later!

But Jesus’ disciples have been blessed with eyes that see and ears that hear the parables. We “get it”—the way people get a joke----we are let in on the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. So, we refrain from jumping to conclusions about the “success” or “failure” of our work. We may see waste and an extravagance of grace offered in all the “wrong” places. Yet, as hearers of today’s parable, we know the story will have an improbable ending of “a hundred, sixty or thirtyfold.” Some other force is at work here, and faith in the word encourages us to surrender to it and have trust that, “my word shall not return to me void.”

The disciples want to know what’s going on. Why does Jesus speak in parables? Jesus’ response to them sounds like he deliberately intends that people not hear or understand him. But Jesus is describing how people react to his words. Some are closed and unreceptive to him. They are hard-hearted and so cannot understand: “They look but do not see and hear, but do not listen or understand.” In Jesus, God is making a gracious offer to humans: some will be receptive and accept the offer, others will reject it.

What makes us receptive to hear and accept God’s Word? What helps us “get” the story Jesus is telling of an extravagant harvest despite all present signs to the contrary? Jesus reminds us, through no effort of our own, we are blessed. We are gifted with the eyes and ears of faith that help us accept the mysterious workings of God. Through the parables we know the mysteries of the kingdom of God: that we are being offered something good we could never get on our own, the love of a

gracious and lavish God who is not stingy in showing us the signs of that love.

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

" From the heavens, the rain and snow come down and do not return there till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful...Isaiah 55:10)

"On behalf of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, we encourage the Senate to take up legislation addressing the challenges and effects of global climate change." (*Letter to U.S. Senate on Climate Change*)

Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good.

US Catholic Bishops' Statement:

"As people of faith, we are convinced that "the earth is the Lord's and all it holds" (Ps 24:1). Our Creator has given us the gift of creation: the air we breathe, the water that sustains life, the fruits of the land that nourish us, and the entire web of life without which human life cannot flourish. We believe our response to global climate change should be a sign of our respect for God's creation. Our government policies and our own actions should be based on the following principles:

The Universal Common Good

Stewardship of God's Creation

Protecting the Environment for Future Generations

Caring for the Poor and Issues of Equity

Each of us should carefully consider our choices and lifestyles. We live in a culture that prizes the consumption of material goods. While the poor often have too little, many of us can be easily caught up in a frenzy of wanting more and more—a bigger home, a larger car, etc. Even though energy resources literally fuel our economy and provide a good quality of life, we need to ask about ways we can conserve energy, prevent pollution, and live more simply."

(US Catholic Bishops' Statement: *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good.*)

Did you know?

More than a dozen religious organizations sent a letter to senators imploring them "to take swift, strong, just, and compassionate action, to arrest the mounting threat to God's Creation and preserve the Earth's life-sustaining capacities for generations to come." The Senate is expected to debate climate change legislation ([S. 2191](#)) in early June.

What can I do?

Go to the US Catholic *Bishops' Climate Change Justice and Health Initiative* website. It is worth some time to read and study and learn.

<http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/ejp/climate/index.shtml>

Go to: <http://www.climatechoices.org> to read about simple choices you and your family can make to reduce negative impact on the environment.

(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:.....

James Cheek #0538027 (On death row since 7/3/97)

Leroy Mann #0255136 (7/15/97)

Phillip Davis #0585797 (8/22/97)

---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 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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