

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 30th SUNDAY (A)

Exodus 22: 20-26 Psalm 18 I Thessalonians 1: 5c-10 Matthew 22: 34-40
by Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

I was talking to a lawyer from California recently and she was telling me about some outdated and silly laws still on the books in her state. For example, did you know that in 1930 a law was passed in Ontario, Ca. forbidding roosters crowing within the city limits? In Los Angeles you can't bathe 2 babies in the same tub at the same time. It is illegal to drive more than 2,000 sheep down Hollywood Blvd at one time. California is not the only place that has strange laws that have not been repealed. In Chicago it is illegal to eat in a place that is on fire. In Denver it is unlawful to lend your vacuum cleaner to your next door neighbor.

Silly laws, aren't they? Yet, let's give the lawmakers the benefit of the doubt that, when they passed those laws, there really was a sheep problem down Hollywood Blvd, or that in that town in Ontario, Ca. the rooster problem had gotten out of hand and they were disturbing people's sleep. Let's presume that most laws are written for a serious reason, but as we know, after time passes, some once-needed laws can become antiquated – no longer applicable. Indeed, they can sound silly to modern people like us. Like the Denver law that says it is illegal to lend a vacuum cleaner to your next door neighbor. I wonder what that was all about!

We have experienced this in religion too – some laws and customs, after the passage of time, can become antiquated. In Jesus' time there were 613 religious laws. Some were called "light laws," because they were of lesser significance. For example, laws pertaining to dietary rules and cleansing rituals. But others were called "heavy," they were laws of importance. For example, the treatment of parents, dealings with neighbors and observance of the Sabbath. The great religious leaders of the time were frequently asked by sincere religious persons to prioritize the laws: name the most important. Thus, people could be helped in their practice and observances of the laws and live better lives. Yet, needless to say, different religious leaders had differing opinions and would argue for their point of view.

We hear such a situation in today's gospel passage. A scholar of the religious law asks Jesus' opinion: "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" But we are told that the question is not sincere. Because the scholar is out to trap

Jesus, whichever commandment Jesus chose, the scholar would have disagreed. Jesus looked deep into his own heart, where his love of God and total dedication to God lay; but also where his deep compassion for us resided. He knew instinctively what the greatest commandment is; it was there in his religious roots.

Jesus drew from the Book of Deuteronomy, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and your mind.” And from the Book of Leviticus he quotes, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus joins the two into one law, for him they are inseparable and he gives a commandment that would never grow outdated.

A lot has changed since Jesus’ time. He didn’t address heart transplants, nuclear warfare, the earth’s warming, in vitro fertilization or the ethical use of the internet. Instead, he left us a teaching that throughout the centuries would guide us and church leadership in addressing these issues, and many more as they arise. He calls each of us to have God as our center: the center of our thoughts, feelings and actions. The way we know that we are living Jesus’ commandment of total dedication to God, who is unseen, is to make that love visible by loving neighbor as self. In addition, we are to give that love as a gift and not as a burden.

Loving neighbor does not mean loving just the people on the other side of the backyard fence; nor having a good feeling for the world in general, in some vague way – “I love all people” – as though they were not individuals with bodies, feelings, hopes and dreams, like us. Jesus’ life shows us whom he considered his neighbor – besides his disciples and friends. Neighbor for Jesus includes the least likely, the overlooked, the vulnerable, the people who are usually described in stereotypes.

Jesus says the second commandment is like the first: if we love the God we cannot see, then we must love the neighbor we can see. Even when the neighbor is noisy and nosey; greedy and unreliable; lies, cheats and steals. It’s hard to like such people, BUT, the second is like the first, Jesus tells us. To love neighbor the way Jesus wants us to do, means being proactive, asking the questions about hurts and listening attentively to answers and, when possible, doing something in response.

This saying of Jesus is the heart of our faith, the core of the gospel, our holy text. It is so central to Jesus’ teaching that it is quoted by Matthew, Mark and Luke, so that we don’t miss it. It doesn’t take a degree in theology or a fine scholar of religious

law to know how to follow Jesus as his disciples. Our religion is not primarily about rules and outdated, silly laws.

Instead, we are invited to a full and complete response to God, a response that requires all our attention, influences all of our decisions and enters every act we do. How can we do this? Simply put, the second commandment is like the first: Love neighbor as yourself. Isn't that why we come each week to church, to hear again Jesus' teaching and to ask forgiveness for not always living it fully? We also come to receive help from this community and the Eucharist we share, so that we can be nourished and strengthened to love God completely and love our neighbor as ourselves.

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

"Thus says the Lord: "You shall not molest or oppress an alien, for you were once aliens yourselves."(Exodus 22:20)

The questions surrounding immigration are many and complicated. The issues of "enforcement" versus "reform" are troubling, however our Church and our Bishops strongly echo the words of today's first reading from Exodus. Our own Bishop Michael Burbidge is a member of the U.S. Catholic Bishops' Committee on Migration, which in a letter on behalf of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), urged the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and President Bush to reexamine the use of worksite enforcement raids as an immigration enforcement tool.

"The humanitarian costs of these raids are immeasurable and unacceptable in a civilized society. While we do not question the right and duty of our government to enforce the law, we do question whether worksite enforcement raids are the most effective and humane method for performing this duty, particularly as they are presently being implemented."

"We have witnessed first-hand the suffering of immigrant families and are gravely concerned about the collateral human consequences of immigration enforcement raids on the family unit. Many families never recover; others never reunite."

"The statement calls for refraining from enforcement activity in certain areas that provide humanitarian relief such as churches, hospitals, community health centers, schools, food banks, and other charitable services. It also calls for the release of caregivers who have dependents offering a variety of release mechanisms available under the law; access to legal representation; respect for basic human dignity; and,

mechanisms for families to remain together and locate each other following an enforcement raid. It also states that non-profit and community groups should be engaged in this effort.

“Absent the effective implementation of these safeguards, we believe that these enforcement raids should be abandoned,” the statement reads, adding that *“immigration enforcement raids demonstrate politically the ability of the government to enforce the law. They do little, however, to solve the broader challenge of illegal immigration. They also reveal, sadly, the failure of a seriously flawed immigration system, which, as we have consistently stated, requires comprehensive reform.”*

The bishops urged the two presidential candidates *“to engage the issue of immigration in a humane, thoughtful, and courageous manner and to turn away from enforcement-only methods.”*

Read the article and letter in their entirety at:
<http://www.usccb.org/comm/archives/2008/08-130.shtml>

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

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:

Jesus said... “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment.

The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Reflection:

The way we know that we are living Jesus’ commandment of total dedication to God, who is unseen, is to make that love visible by loving our neighbor as self. Jesus’ life shows us whom he considered his neighbor. Besides his disciples and friends,

neighbor for Jesus included the least likely, the overlooked, the vulnerable and the people who are usually described in stereotypes.

So we ask ourselves:

Is God at my center, the inspiration and impetus behind my thoughts, feelings and actions?

Who is the surprising neighbor Jesus is calling me to love?

And how shall I share Jesus' love with that person(s)?

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:.....

Iziah Barden #0491889 (On death row since 11/12/99)

Abner Nicholson #0670167 (11/18/99)

Andre L. Fletcher #0130628 (12/9/99)

---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 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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