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Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Aug. 9, 2007 The Peace Pulpit

First of all, just a very a very brief word about the book of Ecclesiastes that I described at the beginning as a book where we don?t find a whole lot of hope. It is a book that, in fact, there was real discussion in the early church whether it should even be included in the planning of the sacred scripture.

What we have to remember as we read that book, and even as we listen to the passage of today, that it was written by someone who had no awareness of resurrection. See, in the Jewish tradition before Jesus, their only understanding was that when you die it was over -- you were gone. The idea of a new life, a fullness of life, comes only with Jesus into the Jewish tradition.

Nevertheless, it?s important to listen to this book and to hear the warning that the author gives to us, that whatever you have when you die, it will be passed on to someone else; it will no longer be yours. And that, of course, is also the message that comes through very powerfully in the gospel.

It?s all over when you die as far as your earthly possessions are concerned, no matter how much wealth you accumulated in your life. Once you?re dead, it?s not yours any longer. But that?s not all that Jesus teaches us today. In fact, if we listen carefully, there?s a very important and much deeper message that Jesus gives to us when he tells us ?avoid greed in every form.?

He?s exhorting us in a very important way, because as we listen to that story that he tells, we discover that the person who stores up wealth is a person who destroys all of his relationships. We may not be aware of this at first when we hear the story, but the first thing, if you notice, when Jesus tells the story he says, ?The land had produced a good harvest.?

The land had produced this good harvest. Oh yes, the person worked on it, but the land was there first, and the crops are given by God. The land, the crops -- it?s all a gift -- and we should relate to all of our possessions with that understanding. And that was very powerful in the Jewish tradition.

Everything was gifts from God, and you relate to the world around you, not as something that you possess for yourself, but as a gift that you cherish, that you protect, that you take care of. You relate to the world in that way. This man in the story had broken that relationship. Somehow he thought that everything was his, that he had made it possible. Not so.

It is a very different relationship in our lives if we think of the world around us and everything that comes from that world -- everything that we have, even though we worked and contributed something for it -- all of it is a gift, and that gives us a whole different relationship to the world around us when we recognize that it?s all a gift from God.

Then the second thing in the story, when the man begins to say, ?Well, how will I protect all of this for myself? I?m going to build a bigger barn and store it all away.? Well, that man it also breaking away from another very important part of the Jewish religious traditions, the traditions of Jesus, because that tradition was always that you be concerned about one another, that you share.

You have a very deep relationship with the whole community. You?re one family of God. There?s been a covenant made between this people and between God, and all of us share in that covenant together. This man is breaking that relationship, going apart to build his own barn, store it all up for himself and no longer maintain that deep relationship with all of his brothers and sisters.

So he becomes more lonely, more alienated. And then it?s striking how Jesus points out that when you begin to store up gifts for yourself alone, there?s even kind of a disconnect within yourself. You?re alienated within your very being. You notice how the man says to himself, ?Self, have a good time,? like he?s separated within himself. There?s a deep alienation from himself.

Finally of course, all of this results in God saying to him: ?You fool! This day that self, that life, is taken from you.? He?s alienated from God. He?s no longer in a relationship with God, because all these other relationships have been broken. That?s what greed will do to you, will do to any of us.

Greed separates us from our understanding of the world as God?s gift -- something to cherish and something to protect and to steward carefully. It separates us from our brothers and sisters as we gather unto ourselves alone, separating ourselves from within ourselves; we become an alienated person and finally, can separate us from God. What greater disaster could there be?

So you see why Jesus says that so powerfully. Avoid greed! It is important that we listen to that carefully. In our lives, how many of us, when you look deeply within your heart, within yourself, the things that you own, the things that have been provided to you in this life, who would really think of those as gifts from God, not something that ?I have earned,? that ?I have made my own??

What a different attitude we?ll have and what a different relationship we?ll have with God when we deepen that awareness: Everything is a gift. Everything is a gift. It makes people who are just overflowing with gratitude and with joy as we recognize how bountiful, how extraordinary is God?s goodness to us.

And if we look at our life within our community, our parish community to start with, our parish family. Do we relate to one another always by sharing what we have? I?m sure that?s true of this parish family -- that there is a spirit of sharing -- but how we deepen that, keep on reaching out to one another.

To me it seems so powerful to think that wall we?re building down there on our border so we won?t have to share our gifts. Isn?t that like building a bigger barn for ourselves? We don?t want to share with those who are in desperate need, trying to come to our country, not because they?re simply thinking of us as the greatest nation in the world. No, because they are desperately in need. It?s a terrible sacrifice to have to make, a person leaving his family behind, his children, his wife; being separated four, five, six, 10 years, because otherwise they couldn?t survive. And we build a wall. It?s like building our own bigger barn.

This past week there was a major discussion in our Congress about providing heath care to children, to millions of children in our country who don?t have health care. Now you would think that would be just something we would automatically as a people say, ?Yes, let?s do it!? but to get the funds for it they?re going to try to get them by cutting back some of the tax breaks for the rich, so now it becomes very controversial.

Those who have that wealth don?t want to let go of it. What?s that say about us as a people? What?s that say

about us as we try to keep in that relationship with God by being the kind of people who understand that everything is a gift and everything is for sharing? We really need to change our attitude and our thinking, our way of acting.

So I invite every one of us to continue to reflect on these readings today, and to reflect especially thinking about how we need to deepen all of our relationships -- our relationship with the world around us, our relationship with all of our brothers and sisters throughout our parish family, our nation and our world, our relationship with God.

And if we do that, marvelous things will happen. St. Paul was exhorting us in that second lesson today, saying, ?Do not lie to one another. You have stripped off the old self and its way of thinking to put on the new, which is being renewed, to reach a perfect knowledge in the likeness of our Creator, to become like God.?

And then at the end Paul is really encouraging us to make changes and also shows us what can happen when we begin to develop these kinds of relationships. Then there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, between circumcised and uncircumcised. There are no strangers, no barbarians, no slaves separated from free people, but Jesus is all and is in all.

Paul was telling us that when we begin to live this way, we?ll build a world where the whole human family comes together. It will be a world of fullness of life for everyone, and a world of peace. Don?t we want to build that kind of a world? If we do, we must listen carefully to all that God has spoken to us today.

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