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Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Sep. 6, 2007 The Peace Pulpit

As a kind of background or context within which to reflect on these scriptures today, I thought it might be important to share with you one other part from the sacred scriptures. This is a passage from the first letter that Paul wrote to the church of Corinth. It's in the very first chapter. Paul is speaking about what we might call the folly, the foolishness of the cross.

He says here, "Christ did not send me to baptize, but to proclaim the good news, and not just with beautiful words. That would be like getting rid of the cross of Christ. The language of the cross remains nonsense for those who are lost, yet for us who are saved, it is the power of God." Paul goes on a little bit further to say, "The Jews asked for miracles and the Greeks for higher knowledge, while here am I proclaiming a crucified Christ. A crucified Christ to the Jews a scandal, and to the Greeks, the wise ones, foolishness."

It's so true, as Paul is saying, "preaching a crucified Christ" as good news? Most people notice foolishness as nonsense. Jesus on the cross, totally weak in human terms, in physical terms, but with a deep moral strength and courage. Jesus on the cross, accepting suffering rather than inflicting it, willing to be killed rather than to kill. To most people that is foolishness. Certainly it was to those so-called "wise people," the Greek wisdom writers.

To the Jews it was a scandal to let yourself be treated like that. There was nothing more humiliating and scandalous than crucifixion, and yet here was Jesus. But Paul ends up that passage and this is what we need to remember and reflect on as we reflect on the lessons today. Paul says, "The weakness of God is stronger than human strength and the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom." The weakness of God is stronger than human strength, and the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom.

That's what these two parables today are trying to bring across to us. There's a kind of human wisdom and it's not bad, it's not evil. It was a human wisdom of those teachers of the law, the Pharisees, in the time of Jesus, who had their 613 rules, the law that they had developed, that you had to live by, and they made sense. They helped to keep order, they helped to keep everything organized in society.

So when there's a person in the synagogue to pray who's crippled, who is in a sense "unclean" according to the rules, Jesus asks a simple question: "Is it OK to cure this person on a Sabbath day when you're not supposed to do any kind of work?" You're not supposed to even lift a finger almost, in doing anything. You have to be totally quiet, totally inactive on the Sabbath day, so to heal, to do something like that, would be a violation of the human rule, the rule that tries to keep order to make sense.

Jesus says no to that. He calls the person forward, heals that person, and allows him to go free - free of his

illness and affliction. The first parable that Jesus tells, and again, it's not evil. He says, According to common sense, when you go to a feast -- Among the Jewish people at the time, there was a very important distinction between different levels of society and who was up high and who was down low, so when you went to a feast it would be very clear that if you weren't one of the elite, you probably shouldn't try to sit too close to the host or hostess. So Jesus said to use common sense. Go to the lowest place and there's a good chance the host or hostess will come in and say, "Oh, no, you should be up higher." So you're going to look really good, whereas if you go to the first place and you get put down, well you're embarrassed in front of everybody; you probably just want to go home. Common sense says do it this way. Go to the lowest, let yourself be lifted up. That's common sense.

Jesus isn't saying common sense is wrong, that human wisdom is wrong, but he says that in the reign of God, we have to go beyond common sense, beyond human wisdom. In the reign of God, when we follow a crucified Christ, when we say a crucified Christ is our model, then we can't depend on human wisdom. That's why Jesus tells a second parable and tells his host that day, "Next time you have a banquet, don't just invite the so-called important or wealthy people. Invite everybody."

Break down all those barriers that separate one group from another. Go out to the highways and byways, bring in the poor, the neglected, the crippled, the blind, the lame, the rejected - bring them all in. Common sense, human wisdom, would not do that. Jesus is saying to break away from that, go beyond, leap into the reign of God, where there aren't rules like that, for God is all-inclusive, all-welcoming, all-loving.

Are we ready to move beyond human wisdom, to try really to live according to the reign of God, the way of Jesus? Let go of what would be common sense and be like Jesus, have a divine wisdom, a wisdom that most people think is foolish. Accept suffering rather than inflict it. Be killed rather than kill. Love to the point of laying down your life for others without condition, without limit. Are we ready to do that?

There are a variety of ways, I think, within our society, within our church, where you might try to ask that question. In our society, right now, we have a great concern (although it's diminished at the moment but it'll come up again) about all those so-called illegal people in our country. Push them away, build a wall - that's what we're doing. "Don't let them in. They'll only pull down our economy, they'll hurt us."

Jesus is saying no. That might be human wisdom, but go beyond that. Welcome them. Begin to share life with them. Begin to understand them. Why are they fleeing their country? Maybe we could do something about it so they won't want to come. Who doesn't want to stay with his family, instead of leaving wife and children behind, to come and try to find work at very low-paying jobs? If we had God's wisdom, we would not be building a wall to keep them out.

When you think about the war, what do we keep doing? We keep thinking somehow that violence will overcome violence. It doesn't. It always creates more violence. So now are we going to face this question in a couple of weeks when Gen. [David] Petraeus comes back [from Iraq] and reports to the Congress. President Bush is trying to say, "No! We have to stay longer. We have to keep on using violence." In fact, Gen. Petraeus has already said, "We're going to be there for at least 10 years."

How many more people have to die in Iraq? How many more of our young people have to die? What seems to

be human wisdom, when somebody threatens you, you just go right back at them. Divine wisdom says no, love your enemy, be good to those who hurt you, return good for evil. That's the only way that we ultimately will ever bring peace into our world, but it takes that divine wisdom to make that choice, so we really need to develop, if we can, the wisdom of Jesus.

If we look at our church, there are some things happening that, again, maybe human wisdom says one thing but God's wisdom, going beyond human wisdom, would say something else. This past week, time after time, we heard Sen. [Larry] Craig [of Idaho], who pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor, he kept saying, "I am not gay. I am not gay." Well, soo what?

That's not a crime, to be gay, and yet in the Christian community, especially among fundamentalists, as we call them, some within our own church community, would push gays away, would not allow our church to be totally inclusive, welcoming to people who are gay. Maybe human wisdom says to do that, but divine wisdom says no, you welcome everybody. Go out into the highways and the byways, bring in those who are rejected and neglected and pushed away. That's divine wisdom.

The other thing that I think about when it comes to the church is this restoration of what we call the Tridentine Mass. Now, if we bring that back, and the pope has said yes, it can be celebrated freely anywhere, in any church, but think about what comes with that. That means you bring with it, a kind of spirit of exclusivity, because it's in a language that's not understood by almost anyone. There might be a few unique persons who can understand Latin, and may pray in Latin, but probably none of us in this church today.

Yet, if this church were to have a Tridentine Mass and it was the only Mass you could get to, you would be excluded, really, from the celebration. Or also in the rules according to the Tridentine Masses, no woman could stand up here and read because women aren't allowed inside the sanctuary. I don't know why we could even call that human wisdom, but it's certainly been the tradition in the church. We started to break away from it, now we come back to it.

Divine wisdom, God's way, would say, "No barriers. No exclusivity. Everyone is equal in freedom and dignity within the community of disciples of Jesus." That's where we've been going, now somehow we're going back. I hope that we might have enough divine wisdom to say no to such a thing and to continue to be a church that is totally inclusive and welcoming, again, where everyone is equal in freedom and dignity.

There are so many other ways in which we could spell out how divine wisdom is different from human wisdom, and how we have to go beyond what so-called common sense says. We have to be like Jesus in reaching out to all and welcoming all, using divine wisdom, and if we can bring ourselves to do it, then we will experience the blessing of living within the reign of God, even as we continue to live here on earth, before we enter into the fullness of that reign in heaven. Because as we heard in our second lesson today, we have come near to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God.

You have come to the solemn feast, the assembly of the firstborn of God. There is God present at this feast, with the spirits of all the upright brought to perfection, and there is Jesus in our midst, the mediator of the new covenant that's with the sprinkled blood that cries out more effectively than Abel's. By using this divine

wisdom, we begin to live even now with the presence of Jesus clearly, powerfully in our midst. We begin to experience the joy, the peace, the fullness of life that comes with the reign of God, with the new covenant established in Jesus.

Bishop Gumbleton preached at St. Hilary Parish, Redford, Mi.

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