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Thomas Gumbleton | Sep. 20, 2007 The Peace Pulpit

Now if we listen carefully to these scripture lessons today, we won't hear extraordinary truths, first about God and then about how we must relate to God. I think that some of us, those of us old enough to have studied the Baltimore Catechism -- and I am sure some of us have -- remember the second or third question in the catechism: Why did God make me? And we know the answer: God made me to know God, to love God and to serve God.

That very first thing, to know God, sets us off in the wrong direction, because we really can't know God. When we start trying to know God, we start putting God in our categories. We think of God as just and we think of what justice means in human terms. We think of God as merciful. What does mercy mean? We think of God as wise. What does wise mean? None of these categories really fit God, although we keep on trying to bring God down to fit within the limits of our minds, our understanding.

Remember a couple weeks ago I mentioned how St. Paul in writing to the church at Corinth was describing how Jesus did something so foolish, showed such weakness, that he was a scandal to the Jews and was foolish to the Greeks, the wise people. Paul says, But wait a minute. God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom. God's weakness is stronger than human strength. Paul was trying to point out to us that we can't categorize God with our descriptions. And that's what we learn in the first lesson today.

The chosen people had been unfaithful. They make a covenant with God and they don't keep it. They begin to worship false Gods. They had said, You are our God and we are your people. Now they are making molten images into gods. At first -- in human terms and categories -- God is going to be just. God is angry at these unfaithful people. But as Moses interacts with God, God becomes merciful.

You see our categories don't fit. Because right away we want to say, How does that justice fit with that mercy? We want to put it all together and make it harmonize according to our categories. But God is beyond that. God is God. We can't limit God. So God decides to be merciful -- that is all there is. So the people are brought back. Again and again, God shows how God keeps reaching out to people.

We would want to be just -- well maybe merciful at times, but just. Punish. Hold accountable. God is just different. We cannot limit God in any way, though we keep trying to with our human constructs and our human categories.

St. Paul realized that in the second lesson today. He really responds in the best way possible: "I give thanks to Jesus who is my strength, who has considered me trustworthy even appointed me to his service, although I have been a blasphemer, a persecutor, a rabid enemy." Paul was filled with hate for the Christians. And he says, The grace of God was more than abundant because God, wanted to display God's greatness in me so that I would be an example for all who are to believe and obtain eternal life. So to God be honor and glory forever and ever,

amen.

Paul recognizes that you can't categorize God. Just give thanks to God, because God reaches out, as God did to those chosen people and God does to Paul, even though he says, I am the worst of sinners. But God comes to him.

And in the Gospel lesson, obviously we are being taught the very same thing. It is important, I think to reflect especially on the situation of the second son. I am sure that most of us when we remember what we call the parable of the prodigal son, we focus on the younger son who went away and wasted all the riches of his father and squandered everything in what the scripture calls a life of loose living. We often -- most often I think -- concentrate on that, but it is really the elder son we have to be taught by.

Luke says at the beginning of the Gospel that Jesus was confronted by the Scribes and the Pharisees who did not like the fact that he was having meals with sinners, with those who were unclean, those who didn't obey every letter of the law. The Scribes and the Pharisees prided themselves on knowing that law, 613 separate laws, every one of which they obeyed or at least pretended to obey with great faithfulness. They were above everybody else. So Jesus draws to himself, goes out to meet Samaritans, prostitutes, tax collectors, all those people who were obviously no good. The Scribes and Pharisees wanted to punish them, to push them away. They are the very ones Jesus goes out to.

It's so different than what the Pharisees and the Scribes who thought they knew God. The way Jesus was was so different. It just blows away all the categories we had. When you look to the second son, wasn't he like the Pharisees? "I have obeyed you all these years" -- like if he were earning his father's love, as if we could earn God's love. In fact, the words he uses are, "I have slaved all these years." What a terrible sense of how we are to relate to God. That we are supposed to be slaves, trying to make sure that we live up to every benchmark that we have established because we think we know what God is or who God is. Instead, God is beyond all our categories.

God is totally love and somehow within that total being of God who is love, all our categories become absorbed and God is simply a God who is always reaching out to us. Always waiting to be gracious to us. Those are the words of Isaiah. Always waiting to be gracious to us. You don't have to earn God's love. You don't have to follow every rule that a clerical institution has devised for us. In many ways -- I say this with sadness -- our church right now seems to be acting like the Scribes and Pharisees. New rules about who can touch the vessels at the altar. About who can come inside the sanctuary. It doesn't make sense. That's not how you worship God by setting up new rules, new categories and then make sure everybody jumps through certain hoops. That's not it at all.

God loves us. God is waiting to be gracious to us. All we have to do is open ourselves to God.

Then if we are going to be able to receive God's goodness, we have to keep on trying to be more like God, being people who reach out always in love. Not measuring how much we should do for this person or that person or in this circumstance or that circumstance. Always just be flowing with generosity. Overflowing. Being loving, merciful. That is how we become what God calls us to be: full human beings. By learning to love and be loved, then we become like God.

Because we are still in the midst of this terrible crisis in Iraq and Gen. Petraeus spoke to us last week and the president did [too], I feel it might be important to have kind of a final sense of how we need to respond to God drawn from our experience being at war again.

Pope John Paul II way back in March of 1991 made a very strong statement against war, against all war because it goes against everything that God is. He gave three reasons why we need to say no to war, never again war.

The second one was because it "throws into upheaval the lives of those who do the killing." What happens to those who learn to kill?

This week I came across a book called Flashback [1]. I read about it and I ordered it. It's a book about post-traumatic stress disorder, suicide and the lessons of war. It's written by a woman whose husband had come back from the war and committed suicide. What war had done to him made it impossible to go on living. That is what John Paul means. War destroys the lives of those who do the killing. In this book, she gives an example of what happens when you go to war, how you become opposite to God, the God who is always reaching out in love to reconcile and draw us back. She says,

> *As this introduction is being written, young American and British soldiers are being told that Iraqi children playing in the road are probably being used by insurgents to slow down their convoys rendering them more vulnerable to attack. In such situations, they have been ordered to run the children down. What this means to those children and their families speaks for itself. And I do not mean to suggest for a moment that the most horrific implications of such a policy is its effect on the troops, but when these young soldiers subsequently find it difficult to sleep or to love or perhaps even to justify their own continued existence and then that is dismissed by their superiors as underdeveloped coping skills, we are either witnessing a terrifying disconnect or a truly monstrous agenda.*

What would happen to a person who ran over a child? Of course you destroy your capacity to love. You almost have to lose your ability to show affection. You have to stop feeling. So you become less than human. You become unlike God, who is love. That is one of the most important ways, I'm convinced, that we have to respond to what we hear today. We have to say no to war because it destroys the lives of those who do the killing, not even to think of the disaster it is to those who are the enemy.

If we really open ourselves today to try to know God as God is, beyond our categories, to try to let God enter into our lives as a merciful loving, unlimited, unconditional loving God. And then we respond to that and learn how to be loving, giving, always reaching out, waiting to give encouragement to others. Then we become what God calls us to be. Full human beings filled with love and able to be loved. Able to experience deeply who God is. Deep within ourselves to know that God is love.

[Bishop Gumbleton preached this homily at St. Hilary Church in Redford, Michigan.]

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Links:
[1] http://www.flashbackhome.com/home.html