

## Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Oct. 19, 2007 The Peace Pulpit

In that short passage from the letter of St. Paul to Timothy, besides giving Timothy encouragement and trying to urge Timothy to be very faithful to his task as a disciple, St. Paul also makes a remark that I think is very crucial for us. He tells us, "The gospel I labor for and even wear chains for like an evildoer, but the word of God is not chained."

Paul was reminding us, and it's a very important reminder, that yes, somebody can try to prevent a disciple from proclaiming God's word. Paul was put in prison because he was preaching the good news of Jesus and they tried to stop him. But Paul says, "No one can chain up the word of God. You may be able to chain up me, put me in jail, but you can't chain up the word of God. You can't stop God's word from being proclaimed."

What Paul is referring to, I think, is very clear. Yes, he can't go around preaching; he's in jail. But as he continues to live according to the way of Jesus, as he continues to be faithful to Jesus' word, even there within that jail, he returns love for hate and reaches out in kindness even to his captors, to his jailers. His very life, his actions, are speaking much more clearly and profoundly than any words he could proclaim. His life is giving the message.

I think that is a very important message for all of us, that the way we live speaks the message of Jesus much more powerfully than any words we might say. I think of this especially at this time because on the 26th of this month, according to the proclamation of Pope Benedict, a peasant from Austria is going to be beatified. This man was jailed. In fact, he was executed in 1943 because he refused to serve in Hitler's army.

So the Nazi regime tried to stifle him, stifle the word he was proclaiming that the German invasion of Poland was wrong, that Hitler's wars were wrong. They tried to stifle him, stop him from speaking. In his own village of St. Radegund in Austria, this man, Franz Jagerstatter, was rejected and reviled by the people there because he spoke out against the Nazi regime which they had determined to follow.

Even the priest of his village tried to keep him from resisting and refusing to serve. Even the bishop tried to tell him, "You have to do your duty and go into the service, be conscripted and wage Hitler's war." Franz Jagerstatter said no. Now they stopped his voice, but here it is, 60 years later, and his voice is being proclaimed, not by what he says, but by the way he acted.

In a world where maybe more than ever we need to hear such a message, that there are times where you must say no in your conscience. We live in a world where war is constantly being promoted. Even in our own nation, how quick we are to go to war.

Maybe this is a time when we really need to hear the message of someone like Franz Jagerstatter, who though he was married and had three children, knew that he had to follow the way of Jesus, had to live out the gospel message, not just try to talk to his neighbors and use words, but by the witness of his life and his death. He proclaimed God's word: "You cannot chain up the word of God."

So now through the proclamation of Pope Benedict, this man's voice is being heard once more in our world, at a time when the message he proclaimed by the way he lived is a message we desperately need to hear, that Jesus refused to use violence, so he refused to wage an unjust war.

But as we think about that, how God's word cannot be chained, we must, I think, be impressed by the courage of this person and might wonder, "How could he be so strong in his conviction? How could he be so courageous that he would give up his family, give up his life, because he knew he had to follow the way of Jesus?"

I think the way Franz Jagerstatter came to that kind of deep conviction, that his life had to proclaim the message of Jesus, was something we can learn from today's scripture lessons. It might not leap out at us, but it's very clear, in the first lesson, what is happening there is that this pagan, Naaman, the Syrian general, comes to the Holy Land to meet the prophet Elisha.

This man doesn't have any awareness of Elisha's God, Yahweh. He believes in his own god, but then when he follows the instructions of Elisha and he is cured, he is able then to proclaim, "Now I know there is no other God anywhere in the world but in Israel." He came to know that God was present there through the life of Elisha and the words of Elisha, so he came to accept God, he experienced the presence of God.

That was a time when people thought of God as this place had its god, another place had its gods, so he had his own gods in Syria. But now he says, "I know there is no real God except the God of Israel," so he wants to take that dirt back with him because he thinks God is in this place and he wants to take the dirt, as the story tells us, back to his land so he can always worship this one, true God.

The same thing is true in the gospel lesson. We might not catch this at first because the first thing we think about when we hear that gospel is how we're supposed to thank God for our blessings. Obviously that's a very important lesson, and the one person does come back and thank God, but there's something deeper here that's more important.

This person was a Samaritan, and the Samaritans were those who rejected the worship of God in Jerusalem, the temple there. They worshiped God at their temple at Mount Gerizim. What was really happening here is that when those 10 lepers were going according to the instruction of Jesus to show themselves to the priests (because that is how they could be certified as being clean), this person had a dilemma.

Jesus said, "Go, show yourself to the priest," the temple at Jerusalem or the temple at Gerizim. Where would he go? But then suddenly he had a very profound insight: No, it isn't just God in Jerusalem or God at Mount Gerizim; God is present in Jesus. So he comes back and he worships Jesus. He recognized that God is present there in Jesus, and that's where the power of healing comes from -- God's presence in Jesus.

That's a profound insight, and because he knew God was present in Jesus, he's ready to follow Jesus, to do whatever Jesus asks. So I suggest that in our prayer today, as we reflect on these scriptures and we understand, as that Samaritan man did or as Naaman the Syrian general did, where God is present. God is present in Jesus.

Then perhaps we deepen our faith, our conviction, that God is present in Jesus, so then we will listen more deeply to everything that Jesus says and like that Samaritan man, and like Naaman, we will want to follow God's way, the way that Jesus shows us because God is present in him. St. Paul reminds us that Jesus is always faithful to us if we are faithful to him.

So as we deepen our conviction about God's presence in Jesus, and we know that Jesus will be faithful to us, perhaps we can be stronger in our own commitments to say, "Yes, we will be faithful to Jesus and follow his way in our world wherever that way of Jesus leads us."

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