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Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Nov. 8, 2007 The Peace Pulpit

A couple of times already this morning I reminded all of us that since we are celebrating a baptism during this liturgy, it's very important and a very good opportunity for us to remind ourselves that we, all of us, have made a commitment to follow Jesus, the commitment that we make in the name of this baby today.

It's a reminder that we need to look at our lives and try to discover if we really have changed in any way and continue to change because we are disciples of Jesus Christ. That's really what the lessons teach us today. They teach us a lot about what it means to be a disciple, and what kind of radical change that should entail in our lives.

In the first lesson, we find a very wise person, the author of this Book of Wisdom, who is trying to explain to us who God is, trying to put into words something about a God who we cannot really explain in any human terms. God is totally other, different from us in every way, so the author speaks about God by saying, "You are able to show your power at any moment. Who can resist the strength of your arm?"

And trying to show the immensity and the otherness of God, he says, "For the entire world lies before you as a grain of sand or like a drop of morning dew falling on the ground." This whole universe of ours is like a tiny speck of sand. That's about as close as we can come to somehow think of the otherness of God, the immensity of God, the difference of God from any of us. A speck of sand, the whole universe, which to us is overwhelming if you start thinking about the billions and billions of years and the planets and the stars, and how it goes on and on and on. It's all a speck of dust before God.

But then the author says something quite extraordinary: "Because you are almighty, all-powerful, you are merciful to all. You overlook sins and you give our children time to repent, to come back." See, this God who is so other from us is a God who, in spite of that, loves us without limit, without condition. A God who is all-powerful is also all-merciful, doesn't have to use that power to coerce us, to dominate us, but draws us with love. Everything that author says in those words where the author is trying to give us some idea of the otherness of God, the immensity of God, suddenly becomes very clear when you see what happens in the gospel.

Here is a man, Zacchaeus, who, as Luke says, is a public tax collector, which means, in effect, he's known as a sinner because the tax collectors were working for the Roman Empire, the occupiers of the Promised Land, the occupiers of the chosen people -- those who dominated over them, treated them cruelly as an occupying army always will.

Zacchaeus was working for that empire, collecting taxes on its behalf, and he was a chief tax collector, which meant that he was given a contract by the Roman authorities and he had to raise a certain amount of taxes, but

he could do it through other people who worked for him in various parts of the Holy Land, and each one had to bring to him a certain amount. They could charge whatever they wanted. If they could get more than he had to pay, it was all his, so he was despised by the people.

I think that's part of the reason he ran ahead and climbed up that tree -- he did not want to be with the crowd; they hated him. But, as Luke says, he was also small so he needed to get up there. Here's the saving thing about Zacchaeus: He wanted to see Jesus. He had this tiny, tiny speck of interest, of wanting to know who this Jesus is, and because of that, he climbs a tree, probably people were laughing at him for doing this -- a grown man dressed up in his fine robes and he's climbing a sycamore tree -- but he doesn't care because he wants to see Jesus.

Then, of course, Jesus, who is this holy teacher, revered by the people, stops right in front of him, and doesn't condemn him like the rest of the people do; he looks upon him with love and says to Zacchaeus, "Come down. I have to stay at your house today. I will be your guest." What a tremendous thing for Jesus to reach out with that kind of love to Zacchaeus, and it overwhelmed him. He had to respond with love.

That's what happens when God reaches out to us in love if we open ourselves. If we are merely seeking God in some small way and we open ourselves to God's love, that love pours in upon us, and like Zacchaeus, it can change us. Look at the change that took place in Zacchaeus. Here this tax collector, this cheat and fraud, someone who deserved, according to our principles, to be in jail -- because he's been touched by the love of Jesus, he's transformed.

He says, "I'm ready to give away half of my property to the poor." Now that may not sound like a lot, but think about it for a moment. Who of us, even with the excess that most of us probably have, are ready to stand up and say, "Because I want to follow Jesus, who said, 'Blessed are the poor,' I'm going to give half of what I have away"? I doubt it.

We haven't really reached that point where we're ready to make radical changes in our lives. Zacchaeus was though, because he really accepted that love that Jesus was extending to him. He says, "If I have cheated anybody, I'll pay them back four times -- way more than I owe them -- just to show that I am ready to follow Jesus radically," and he does. He welcomes Jesus into his house and becomes a follower.

In *The Michigan Catholic* this week, there's an article, which if you have *The Michigan Catholic* available, I suggest you read. It's about a person who was a radical follower of Jesus and who was beatified a week ago Friday. I feel very blessed because I was there at the beatification ceremony. The person who was beatified, now proclaimed blessed, one to whom we can pray, to whom we can look up to as a model for us, was Franz Jagerstatter, an Austrian peasant, who lived in a tiny village just a very short distance from the German border, back in the early part of the last century.

When World War II came along and Hitler had taken over Austria, he was subject to conscription in the German army. Franz Jagerstatter was a very careful reader of the scriptures. He never had a very extensive education, certainly not higher education, but he read the gospel every day. He worked as a sacristan in the tiny church in the village of St. Radegund where he lived.

When he was out in the field -- he was a farmer -- he would often be reflecting on God's word. So when the call came for him to serve in Hitler's armies, he knew he could not do it. He could not do it and follow Jesus -- wage a war of aggression, conform to the teachings of the ideology of Nazism, fight on Hitler's behalf on that ideology. So he said no -- one of the very few people who did.

Even in his village, he was the only person who was able to do this, and saw clearly enough. Even his parish priest told him, "No, you shouldn't do it. You have to do what everybody else does. You have to serve your country." It was very hard for him, his wife and three children. She at first thought she could not let this happen and encouraged him like the others did: "For the sake of your children, you must go," because the alternative was to be executed.

Franz knew that he could not serve Hitler's armies, fight in Hitler's wars, so he said no and Franziska, his widow, who is still living at 94 years old, a very beautiful person. She came to peace with his decision and supported him. The three children -- five, seven and eight-and-a-half years old -- as they grew up, they came to understand what their father did.

But they experienced a lot of hostility in the village where they lived. People spurned them, ridiculed them, but Franziska and the children survived all of that and last week in this glorious ceremony, Franz was acknowledged by our whole church to be the one who really followed Jesus, rejecting the violence that he was asked to participate in, rejecting the pagan ideology of Nazism, being faithful to the teachings of the gospel.

I was there at that ceremony. I've come to know this family and visited with them a number of times over the last 20 or 25 years. There were two points in the ceremony where it was especially moving. The first, after the cardinal from Rome who is the head of the Congregation for Saints, read the proclamation written by Pope Benedict, acknowledging what Franz had done and raising him to the status of beatified, behind the altar there was a huge picture that was slowly raised until you could see it throughout the whole cathedral.

It was almost as though you could sense he was being raised to heaven and it just touched everybody. As the picture came to the top of where it was placed, there was really long applause. People recognized that this person had followed Jesus and they were acclaiming him.

The other point was where Franziska and the three children with their spouses and their children -- grandchildren and great-grandchildren -- Franziska came forward with a small, golden urn, in which there were relics of Franz, to give them to the cardinal to be placed before the altar. As she bent over and kissed that urn, you could sense the deep spirit of joy that she must have experienced at knowing that her husband was so finely acclaimed, but also the deep loss, 64 years that she has struggled to live without him.

Here is an amazing example of people who are really faithful to Jesus, radically changed their lives in order to follow Jesus. I'm not suggesting that any of us will have to give our lives in order to be faithful to Jesus, but that has to be our disposition, to be ready to give up anything in order to be faithful to Jesus, to follow his way, the teachings that he gives us in the gospels, his example, the values that he lived.

So perhaps even though we don't expect that we would have to give our lives, we might have to look into our lives and determine how we must change in some ways, every one of us, in some way, to become more faithful to the way of Jesus. That's the example that we must give to Jack Eugene as we baptize him today, that we will be faithful to the way of Jesus, be models for this youngster and all the young people in our church, that they will know what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

Surely, when we do that, we can be confident that Jesus will look upon us as he did upon Zacchaeus, with love, a love that forgives everything that we've ever done that is wrong, and that calls us to love in return and to follow him faithfully.

[Bishop Gumbleton preached this homily at Homily at St. Hilary Parish in Redford, Mich.]

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