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Second Sunday of Lent

Thomas Gumbleton | Feb. 21, 2008 The Peace Pulpit

As we listen to this gospel and to the three readings of today, it becomes very clear that the main subject for us to reflect upon is our call to follow Jesus, to be disciples of Jesus. That's clear because as we just heard proclaimed in the second lesson, Paul writing to Timothy, "Do not be ashamed of testifying to our Lord nor of seeing me in chains. On the contrary, do your share in laboring for the gospel with the strength of God. God loved us and called us, a calling which proceeds from God's holiness. This calling does not depend on our merits, but on God's generosity and on God's own initiative."

Also, we see in the gospel lesson the calling of Jesus, a calling which he announces to his disciples. As I pointed out before I read the text for today, it is a calling to go to Jerusalem to be given over to his enemies, to be tortured and executed on the cross so that he could proclaim the good news of God's constant love, unlimited love. As the call of Jesus was to die on that cross, loving and praying for the very ones putting him to death, it is a calling to transform our world into the reign of God by the transforming power of love. That's the call of Jesus.

That's the call he was discussing with Elijah and Moses in that experience of the transfiguration where Jesus himself became transformed. God affirmed his call: "You are my chosen one, my beloved. In you I am well pleased." And of course in the first lesson, we also understand Abraham, Sarah, being called by God, a call that really is, in a sense, the model for every call of every person to go where God leads. The call of Abraham and Sarah is at the beginning of the recorded history of the chosen people, something that happened now almost 4,000 years ago.

If we reflect on the call of Abraham and Sarah, we see how such a call revolves around movement, and every call of God revolves on a movement by the individual being called from one place, sometimes even one physical place to another, but always from some place of our relationship with God to a deeper place of relationship with God, moving. I would say it is always exchanging a position of security for a position of insecurity, not even knowing the final destination when the journey starts.

That was clear of Abraham and Sarah - they were comfortable and secure where they were, they knew people, places, and had lived there for many, many years. Now God was saying leave all of that, give up your security and go where I lead you, without even knowing where that goal is. This is what it means to be called by God. In the gospel lesson, we see how Jesus fulfills what had happened after Abraham and Sarah had begun the development of the chosen people of Israel.

Down through the centuries, through the Law, through the prophets, the chosen people were bound to God in a covenant, and as long as they were faithful, God was their God and they were God's people. God always remained their God, but sometimes they were not faithful in being the people of God. The Law was the way to

maintain that covenant relationship and when they began to fall away, then the prophets would call them back. Elijah obviously is a symbol of all the prophets through those thousands of years of the history of the chosen people, and Moses is the great lawgiver, a sign of that law that bound them, that covenant that bound them to God. As Jesus appears together with them, it's clear in the gospel that Jesus becomes the fulfillment of that Law and the prophets. In Jesus now, God is being fully revealed. It's the call of Jesus that God affirms in that mystical experience that Jesus had on the mount with James, John and Peter.

Jesus' call is now being carried on by the church, in whom Jesus continues to live in every one of us, in the whole body of Christ, the church. As Jesus was called to transform this world through that fantastic and fascinating power of love, so are we in the church. As we reflect on these lessons and understand that we are the ones that God has now called, we must reflect on how faithful we are to the call that God has given to us, a call to move ever forward in trying to follow the way of Jesus and to move without always having a clear understanding of where God is leading us, what God is asking of us, but simply to follow the way of Jesus.

As God said in that mystical experience of Jesus, "You are my chosen one, the one in whom I am well pleased," and then to the disciples, "Listen to him, listen to Jesus." I have a sense that we have not always listened deeply and faithfully to Jesus. Jesus came to be the light of the nations, the light of the world, the one transforming the world, but he's left and left the church, a community of disciples, behind, and it's our task now to be that light to the world, the light to the nations, the transforming power within the world to make it as close an image of the reign of God as possible.

When I think of how our church acts sometimes, and maybe without our knowing it, any one of us as an individual within the church, when we look at the way of Jesus and look at the way we act, we fall short. I think that within the church, Jesus was always the compassionate, welcoming, loving, forgiving messenger of God. In our church, we still reject people because of who they are. I've said this before and I repeat it today; we fail people who are of homosexual orientation. Most of them have not felt, and still do not feel, truly welcome, truly accepted as who they are and the person that God has made them.

Another area where we continue to fail is in full equality for every person within the church. Women are discriminated [against] within our church. Women are not allowed to receive all the sacraments of the church, like every baptized person should be allowed to do. Women are not allowed to be fully ordained ministers within the church.

When you look at the gospels and see how Jesus related to women, and how Jesus broke down the barriers that had been established by the 613 rules that had been established by the religious leaders within the Jewish community, and Jesus refused to abide by rules that discriminated against women, discriminated against the downcast, the poor and the oppressed. Jesus was always working to change that. We as a church do not always work to change what is so unjust in the world in which we live.

But I think maybe where we have to struggle the most at the present time, and I think of these issues because we're in a political campaign, and we have to be careful not just to be caught up in the propaganda, so to speak, of the moment. We have to listen deeply to Jesus, to the way of Jesus in regard to issues like health care, where every person has a right to health care. Every person has a right to a full human life, so we have to be more committed to lifting up the poor and the oppressed.

The issue of immigration is a very important issue and continues to be raised in this campaign. Can you imagine a loving, compassionate, welcoming Jesus telling people, "You're not legal, you're not allowed to be part of a community where you have come out of desperation and poverty"? Jesus could not be that way. Even in the Old Testament, one of the commands given by God: "Welcome the alien, the stranger, into your midst," I'm afraid that we as a church, and as individuals within the church, find ourselves not always being on the side of the poor and the oppressed.

Maybe the most important area is the one that Abraham showed so clearly - giving up what would seem to be his and Sarah's security and risking - In our political campaigns, we hear people clamoring for making sure our nation is secure, that we would be the most powerful nation on the face of the earth, maintain the security of our borders, instead of reaching out in love to our so-called enemies, trying to change the world through that fascinating power of love.

Recently I've been reading a book called *JFK and the Unspeakable* and I have found it amazing how different were the words, gestures and actions and the policies proposed by President Kennedy back in the early 1960s, when we were engaged in the Cold War, the arms race, war in Vietnam. John Kennedy rejected the idea that our security could be built on arms.

Here's what I read in this book, *JFK and the Unspeakable*. In 1961, the fall of that year when the Berlin crisis was happening, which was a threat that the Cold War would move in to hot war, a heated conflict, all-out war with the Soviet Union and we were being pushed toward engaging in an unending arms race. When John Kennedy went to speak before the United Nations in the fall of 1961, here's part of the extraordinary, amazing speech that he gave:

"Today, every inhabitant of this planet must contemplate the day when this planet may no longer be habitable. Every man, woman and child lives under a nuclear Sword of Damocles, hanging by the slenderest of threads, capable of being cut at any moment by accident or miscalculation, or by madness. The weapons of war must be abolished before they abolish us." Further on in his speech, he said, "It is, therefore, our intention to challenge the Soviet Union, not to an arms race, but to a peace race, to advance together, step by step, stage by stage, until general and complete disarmament has been achieved."

People would say, "That's naïve, that's wrong; we need to build up our weapons systems," as we are doing rapidly, even as we condemn other nations for doing the same thing. John Kennedy had a wisdom that could have brought us to genuine peace, had the way he suggested been followed. He didn't live long enough to do it. He was murdered, even some would say, to prevent his being able to do it, but now more than ever, we must begin to follow that path. It may seem like we're giving up our security, but that which we call security, John Kennedy called madness.

And as I reflect now on the way of Jesus, the call of Jesus affirmed by God in that mystical experience, that Jesus must go through suffering and death to come to new life and resurrection, that Jesus must do that with the reaching out even to his enemies, loving even those putting him to death, that's the spirit we must begin to generate within ourselves if we really want to follow the call that is the call given to every one of us.

Jesus said it, in that conversation with his disciples just before his mystical experience, "If you want to be my disciple, deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me." God said, "Listen to him."

I pray that I can listen to him, that you can listen to him, that our whole church will listen to him and that we can become a light to the nations, a light to all of the world, a light that will guide us into the reign of God, a place where there will be total justice, fullness of life for everyone and peace for our planet.

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