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Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Jun. 5, 2008 The Peace Pulpit

As you've noticed, I'm sure, by the fact that I'm wearing green vestments today, not the white or the red that we've seen over the past 10 or 12 weeks, we have returned to what we call "ordinary time." We finished the celebration of Lent and Easter, Pentecost and then Trinity Sunday and Corpus Christi. So now we begin once more to take up the gospel of Matthew, which we will follow throughout this year.

Today's passage is the end of what surely is the most challenging part of Matthew's Gospel, that long discourse that we call the Sermon on the Mount, a discourse which challenges us to be faithful to the very hard, difficult, challenging teachings of Jesus. This discourse is actually in the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Mark, but in each of those gospels there's some difference.

Matthew has Jesus go up in the hillside, teaching from the mountaintop to show that Jesus is now the new Moses. Moses had gone up on the mountain of Sinai, had that profound experience of God, and came with the commandments, the guidance of God for the new covenant that God had entered into with the people: "I am your God, you are my people, follow my ways."

Luke has Jesus on the plain in the midst of the people, and especially the poor. So you notice a difference when Luke gives beatitudes, he says, "Blessed are the poor," and goes right in front of Jesus, "and woe to the rich." Matthew doesn't have that. Matthew has teaching from the heights and 'blessed are the poor in spirit.' It doesn't have the woes that Luke has.

So there are differences between these two accounts, but a very important point is that both of them conclude with this parable that we heard this morning about the wise person who built a house on a rock; the foolish person built the house on sand.

The wise person is the one who hears the word of God and follows it. That's what Jesus is saying when he tells us, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the reign of God, but the one who does the will of God."

The will of God: "Anyone who hears these words of mine and acts accordingly," that is the one who is following God's will. Luke and Matthew both use this parable at the end to show how Jesus really meant what he said.

It must have been true right there at the beginning, that people found these teachings of Jesus almost too much.

Remember what Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor, blessed are the gentle, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice's sake. Blessed are those who work for peace."

In all of these ways, Jesus is describing the way that we must live if we're going to follow him. We have to live with gentleness, with compassion, the spirit of forgiveness, the spirit of poverty, and it's very challenging. But what's even more challenging is when Jesus goes on as we know, and tells us, "You have heard that it was said of old, 'Thou shalt not kill,' but I say to you, anyone who even carries a grudge in their heart against their brother or sister is not worthy of me. I say to you, even if you're going to the altar to offer your gift and there you remember your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift, go first, be reconciled."

Jesus is saying nothing is more important than forgiveness within our community - reconciliation with one another if there's been some discord. Nothing is more important, not even bringing your gift to the altar to worship God.

Then of course, Jesus goes on to say, "You have heard that it was said of old, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,' but I say to you, offer no violent resistance to evil. If someone wants you to go one mile, go two. If someone strikes you in the one cheek, turn the other. If someone wants to take your coat, give them your cloak also."

No matter what happens, you respond with love.

Can you do that? Is it possible for us to really do that?

"You heard that it was said of old, 'Love your neighbor, hate your enemy,' but I say to you, love your enemy. Do good to the one who hurts you. Return good for evil." These are really challenging teachings of Jesus and as I say, probably, that first Christian community wondered, "Did he really mean it? Are these teachings for us to live in our everyday life? Are we really expected to give up violence, give up hatred, respond to any evil perpetrated against us with love? Did he mean that?"

Well, what Jesus is telling us in that parable at the end, "Yes, I mean all of this. I really mean that you have to try to live according to this way, the way of God. Those who hear my words and follow them are building their house, that is their whole life is being built on rock. If you don't hear my words and follow them, you're a fool. You're building your life on sand and it will be destroyed."

It's important for us, as we reflect on this and hear Jesus speak to us so clearly, that we bring it in to the reality of our everyday life. That means that we have to challenge ourselves about the possessions we have. Do we really have too much, especially in a world where the majority of the people are absolutely poor?

Are we ready to forgive within our families, in our parish family?

Are we ready to love our enemies?

This has to be something that we carry out, not only in our everyday life, but also we have a responsibility to try and make sure that our nation is living according to these values of Jesus, especially since we're a nation that's so heavily armed and is so quick to go to war.

Over the past few weeks, I've been to three or four different parishes and I notice in the Prayer of the Faithful, there's always a prayer for our young men and women serving our country -- sometimes they say "defending our country" -- in Iraq. I'm not against praying for our soldiers who are over there waging war, but I have not heard, in the Prayer of the Faithful, a prayer for the people of Iraq.

"Love your enemies." If these are our enemies -- and I don't understand why they are, but if they are -- we must love them and pray for them rather than continue to kill them.

This past week, and this is an example, it seems to me, of how we fail as a nation, 111 nations, in an international meeting that took place in Dublin, Ireland, signed onto a treaty to ban cluster bombs. I don't know if you've heard of such weapons, but the United States produces more of them than any other nation in the world.

We have used them consistently in Afghanistan, now in Iraq, and we refused to sign the treaty. We're not going to give up these weapons. But a cluster bomb is a huge bomb that is dropped from 35,000 feet, descends toward the earth, and then before it strikes, explodes and hundreds of tiny bomblets are dropped.

These come down then, and as the heat of the earth rises and meets them, they explode and they're filled with tiny pellets of steel that fly in every direction, cover two or three football fields -- that's how far they go -- and when they strike people, they tear them apart.

In Iraq, we've been using these cluster bombs. Recently I read an interview with a doctor who is part of the group called "Doctors for Iraq" and he had gone with some other doctors in to the city of Fallujah after we had bombed that city of 350,000 people with cluster bombs. He said, "In the third day of the siege, they used the cluster bomb. And in that day we didn't work as doctors, we just collected the heads of children and women. Heads and limbs, and I remember our duty was just to find the appropriate limb with the appropriate body and head so we can put in one bag so we can prepare it for being buried. That night was six hours. It was so long, six hours.

"And then there was this famous picture on Al Jazeera, of a child, his brains opened, [he lost] all his brains. It was famous picture. I've carried that child with my hands?[he was one] of eight, four children and four women. All of them are just pieces."

That's what a cluster bomb does and we as a nation refused to reject that kind of weapon. There's something wrong with that sort of attitude, it seems to me, especially when you measure it against Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount.

We have to change, and to many of us it will mean radical change in our lives. It's very difficult to follow this way of Jesus, the way of the beatitudes, the way of active love, the way of rejecting violence and war. We might

feel that we can't do it, it's too much, God really wouldn't expect that of us. After all, we live in a world where there is so much evil.

It's almost as though we want to postpone following the way of Jesus until the afterlife. But then, of course, you don't need the way of Jesus. It's now that we do need it. If we find it's difficult to understand how we might do it, then we really should reflect carefully on what St. Paul wrote to that church in Rome, where they were concerned only about following the 613 prescriptions of the Jewish law, and thinking that somehow blind obedience and formalistic carrying out of the law was all that was necessary. But Paul reminds them, and it's a very beautiful passage, "God makes us holy by means of faith in Jesus Christ, and this is applied to all who believe, without distinction of persons."

What Paul is telling us is that God's love, if we open ourselves, will be poured into our hearts, through the Holy Spirit that was given to us, and that love of God will change us and will enable us to follow the way of Jesus.

So if we wish to be converted to this way of Jesus, I hope we will pray that we can open our hearts to the love of God and let that love of God enter us, transform us, so that now we can become true disciples of Jesus, following his way, a way that will lead ultimately to the reign of God, a reign of justice and peace in our world.

[This homily was delivered Sunday, June 1, 2008 at St. Patrick Parish, Detroit.]

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