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Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Jul. 17, 2008 The Peace Pulpit

Not many Sundays ago, as we began the ordinary time of the year, the gospel writers, Matthew and Mark especially, showed us Jesus beginning his public life. We heard Jesus proclaim, "The reign of God is at hand. Change your lives." The reign of God is ready to break forth -- that's what Jesus was proclaiming -- a message of good news.

Now as we continue our reading of the Gospel of Matthew this year, we come to a part where Jesus begins to explain for us what the reign of God is, how we enter in to it, how we must live, how we must change our lives, if we really are going to enter in to the reign of God and be able to experience that reign come to its fullness within ourselves and ultimately at some point, the reign of God breaking forth and transforming our whole world, our whole universe.

Today we have a parable that Jesus tells us that gives us very important instruction about the reign of God. The reign of God is formed and guided by the word of God. Jesus tells us this parable to help us to understand how that happens. This word of God is like a seed. In the parable, the seed falls in various places and various results come about.

What we need to do, first of all, I think, is understand that the word of God is that message that has been proclaimed through the hundreds and thousands of years, the millennia, all this time where God has been revealed through a written word and we find this in the scriptures. Also, the Word of God is Jesus, so if we really want to listen to the word of God, we have to come to know Jesus, watch how he acts in the scriptures as described in the gospels, listen to the words that he says.

We find that this word of God is revealed in Jesus, the Word of God. We discover a Jesus who is gentle; a Jesus who is always ready to reach out to the marginalized to draw people in, never to exclude or push away; a Jesus who heals; a Jesus who nourishes, nurtures and feeds; a Jesus who listens; a Jesus who has compassion; a Jesus who brings about justice; a Jesus who loves and is love.

It takes a lot for us to listen to this Word of God, Jesus. We have to enter into ourselves and be open. In the parable today, the seed that Jesus speaks about represents, first of all, this word of God, but the seed also represents those who respond to the word of God.

Here is where the challenge comes for us and for our whole church.

The seed represents those who respond. Some fall on hard ground. The seed falls, sprouts up, but doesn't have any deep roots and is scorched and dies. Or the seed falls among the thorns that grow up with the seed and chokes the wheat before it can come to fullness. But then there's the good ground where the seed falls and grows and produces fruit thirtyfold, sixtyfold, a hundredfold.

Part of our listening to this parable is to try to understand the kind of ground we are, I am. We have to ask ourselves: Are we ones who listen only superficially to God's word so that it is present for a while but quickly dies out. Or are we ones who the cares and concerns of life around us choke the word of God. Or maybe for most of us, it's just a matter of being too busy to listen, to enter deeply into ourselves and let God's word take root deeply.

It's not only each of us individually, but our whole church, the community of disciples of Jesus, needs to discern what kind of ground we are.

Are we the ground, again, where the seed takes a very superficial root and doesn't go deep? Or are we the kind of community where many other concerns, that really aren't all that important, take up our time and keep us from being a community formed by the word of God deeply, a community that is focused on that word and so becomes a community of justice, where leaders are held accountable, where anyone who has been treated with injustice is given an opportunity for justice to be done or healing to take place?

There's much that has to change in our community, our whole church, and as we listen to these words today as members of the Survivors' Network of those Abused by Priests, we have a responsibility to continue to try to change ourselves to be that good ground where the word of God really can take root and bring healing and goodness into our lives.

But we also have the responsibility to keep on trying to change our church, to call our leadership to accountability, so that the word of God will be a word of justice and a word of love within our whole community.

It's daunting when we begin to understand what God is really asking of us. If you have ears, listen, listen deeply. Let the word of God change each of us from within, deeply. Our whole church, listen, be changed from within, deeply.

Yet, even though it seems so daunting, as we listen to the other lessons today, we can find reason for hope, a very firm and confident hope.

The first lesson is a powerful expression by the great prophet Isaiah, how the word of God cannot be denied. It will bring forth fullness of fruit. Isaiah was preaching to the chosen people at a time when they were in exile. Everything had been lost. They had refused, actually, to listen to the word of God proclaimed by Jeremiah. They put all their trust in armies and war and had not listened to what Jeremiah had said, so they were taken off into exile. Now even as they're in exile, the prophet Isaiah proclaims among them that the word of God is still going to restore them, bring them back.

"As the rain and snow come down from heaven and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth. It shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I propose and succeed in the thing for which I sent it."

God's word cannot be obstructed, blocked, denied. God's word will prevail.

That's what Isaiah is telling us and that is what can and will happen for each of us and for our church, our whole community.

St. Paul puts the same thing in a quite different image, but it's still the same message. Paul says "I consider the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the whole of creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God. This creation will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the glorious freedom of the children of God."

This is a very powerful message of hope. God's word cannot be denied, cannot be obstructed, cannot be overcome. God's word will prevail.

I hope that each of us can develop a deep confidence in this word of God, that each of us can truly listen deeply, try to become that good ground in which the word of God can flourish. I certainly pray, and I know we all pray, that our whole community of disciples, our church, can become the good ground, can listen to God's word, because this is the way that the reign of God, which Jesus has come to proclaim in our midst, will happen.

Our world will be transformed, each of us in our own individual lives will be transformed. The word of God will bear fruit, thirtyfold, sixtyfold, a hundredfold.

This message that God proclaims in our midst today is a message of great hope. It's a message of great challenge, because it requires us to bring about change to be the good ground. Ultimately, I hope it is for all of us, a message of great joy, knowing that as we become that good ground, God's word will break forth within us and will bring its healing, its love, its goodness -- transform our lives -- and through us, bring about the transformation of our church and of our world.

The reign of God is at hand, God's word is proclaimed, the reign of God will break forth thirtyfold, sixtyfold, a hundredfold. We know this will happen and so we are people of hope and people of joy as we listen to this word of God, the message of Jesus today. We will leave our meeting filled with hope, with determination and with confidence. God's word will prevail.

[**Editor's Note:**Bishop Gumbleton preached this homily in Chicago at the National Meeting of SNAP, Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, July 13.]

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