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Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Jul. 24, 2008 The Peace Pulpit

As I mentioned in introducing the Gospel, Jesus is instructing us, and has instructed us last week and now today and next week, through parables. He's trying to teach us about what is really the meaning of his mission - why he came into the world, why he gathered a community of disciples, and then at the end of his life, sent them out to continue his work. It's all about the reign of God. That's why Jesus came.

Sometimes you hear preachers, especially in a very strong evangelical tradition, telling us, "You have to be saved. Salvation is what it's all about," and sometimes people will experience, "I am saved!" It's over. They're saved. But that's not the way it really is with Jesus, and that's not really why he came, to save each one of us individually.

No, as he said at the beginning of his public life, "The reign of God is at hand. The reign of God is right here, ready to break forth, it's at hand. Change your lives; begin to transform yourselves so you can enter into that reign of God." Then ultimately he will tell us, "Go and change the world, transform it into the reign of God." It's the reign of God that Jesus is proclaiming, why he came, to make that reign of God break forth.

What is the reign of God? Sometimes we call it the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God, and when we do that we tend to think of it as a place. No, that's not it - it's not a place. The reign of God is the dynamic rule of God's love in our world. The idea of Jesus proclaiming this is that we all need to come under that rule of love. That's what makes the reign of God. It's God's order for the world, for all of the universe, under the dynamic of love, God's dynamic rule of love.

When that happens, you see, our world will be transformed. It will be the reign of God when all of us transform our lives so that we enter into the dynamic of God's love. When that happens in its fullness will be the end time when Jesus will return. The reign of God will come in its fullness.

I'm sure you remember the beginning of the preaching of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew: "Blessed are the poor, blessed are the gentle, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice" - the beatitudes, and then that whole Sermon on the Mount. He's telling us how you live within the reign of God. There are certain ways that you must change your lives in order to enter into this reign of God, to live under the rule of God's love.

But now in the parables that Jesus is teaching us, he wants us to try to understand more about this reign of God, and today's three parables are very helpful.

The first one about the weeds and the wheat - what Jesus is showing us there (I think it becomes very clear) is that in the reign of God, we don't rush to judgment. We don't decide, "This person is good, that person is bad, get rid of that one," no; we let everyone grow together within the community.

It's interesting that the weed that Jesus was talking about has a particular name in the Aramaic that Jesus spoke. We would call it "zizania." In the beginning of its growth, this weed looks very much like wheat coming up, so there is that danger that by ripping out the weeds, you're going to rip out the wheat and destroy what God is trying to build.

When you let the two grow together, you find that Jesus is, in fact, showing us that wisdom of God that we learned about in the first lesson, where that writer tells us, "God's strength is the source of justice because God is the God of all. God is merciful to everyone. God isn't a God who is rooting out, destroying. God is a God of strength, judges with prudence and governs us with great patience." That's how it is within the reign of God if we follow this wisdom of Jesus; we don't try to rip out.

What would that say about our church? We're the community of disciples of Jesus. We're here to promote the reign of God. It seems to me, it's pretty clear that Jesus is telling us our communities must welcome everybody, be very inclusive. That isn't the way it is sometimes in the church. If you follow the news at all, you realize that there are places where the bishop, thinking he is the powerful one who rules rather than God being the one who is powerful and rules with love, destroys gay-friendly parishes.

You can't be that way. That's so wrong. We ought to be gay-friendly, every parish. We don't decide who's worthy and who isn't. We ought to be totally inclusive in every way - rich and poor, old and young, black and white or brown - totally inclusive. Let everyone grow; God will decide who is worthy of the kingdom and who isn't. It's not up to us.

There's something very wise in that parable too that we could easily miss. The landowner says, "Let them both grow, and then at the harvest you can separate them, and you take the weeds, tie those into bundles, and you have fuel for burning." So you transform something that's bad into something that's good and useful and the wheat, of course, you change into bread.

Instead of destroying the weeds and perhaps destroying the wheat at the beginning, you end up with a double harvest. That's the wisdom of God. That's the way the reign of God works, if we follow what Jesus teaches us. The other two parables obviously are telling us that small is good.

Again, what's happening in the church throughout our country? Small parishes everywhere are being stifled, destroyed, closed, ended, and yet it's within a small parish community that the transforming work of God really

happens, it seems to me, where people know one another, where they love one another, they work for one another, and they reach out into the community. Look what's happening here.

You're a perfect example of a small community that is trying to make the reign of God happen by reaching out, drawing in, transforming this neighborhood and the people within it. Jesus is telling us that that tiny mustard seed becomes a tree, and that tiny bit of yeast makes the whole batch of dough rise, it transforms. In that parable too, there's a part of it that we might easily miss.

Ordinarily in the scriptures, yeast is thought of as a corrupting influence. You may remember at the Passover time, which for us is Easter time, the chosen people were instructed, "Get rid of all the old leaven, the old yeast. Get rid of it. It's corrupt." Jesus says, "Look, this that we call corrupt is powerful," it transforms that tiny bit of dough into a whole batch of dough that becomes bread.

So again, Jesus is taking something that we would call bad, transforming it into good. That's how God works, and that's what the reign of God is supposed to be about - letting the wheat and weeds grow together. Let God do the judging, the choosing, let God do the transforming. The small seed, the small bit of leaven, let God do the work. We're simply ministers of God in the service of God, trying to promote the reign of God.

I hope that we can hear these parables carefully and listen to them deeply so that they really guide us now, as we try to be a community that is making the reign of God happen as Jesus calls us: "The reign of God is at hand," and when we follow the way of God, the reign of God will break forth in ever greater fullness.

And we might, finally then, turn to St. Paul in his message to that church at Rome and remind ourselves of what Paul says. We don't have to keep on praying and praying for this reign of God to happen. No, the spirit of God is within us and all we have to do is listen to that spirit. Paul tells us: "How do we ask? What shall we ask for? We do not know, but the spirit intercedes for us without words and whoever sees inner secrets knows the desires of the spirit, for the spirit asks for the holy ones what is pleasing to God."

So if we want to really enter into the reign of God, we must begin to listen to that spirit within us and that spirit will guide us so we can follow the wisdom of Jesus as he teaches us in these parables, and we will be the kind of community that really is living under the dynamic rule of God's love, and we will be making our world a world where the reign of God will happen.

[Bishop Gumbleton preached at St. Patrick's Church in Detroit, Mi.]

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