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Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Aug. 7, 2008 The Peace Pulpit

Over the last four or five Sundays, our liturgy of the word has focused on the reign of God. We were reminded how, when Jesus first began his public life, his first declaration was, "The reign of God is at hand. Change your lives."

Then we began to reflect on passages where Jesus told short stories, parables, in which he tried to say, "The reign of God is like this." We remember maybe the weeds and the wheat in the field, the yeast, the pearl of great price, or the treasure hidden in the field. All of these stories helped us to understand what the reign of God is, what it's like.

The other day it occurred to me that when we're trying to understand the reign of God, maybe the easiest way is simply to remember the words of the "Our Father," the prayer that we say so often. "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done."

"Thy will be done" -- that makes the reign of God, the kingdom of God, happen and makes it come into our lives. When God's will is done, the reign of God is when all of us in all of creation live according to the will of God. That's the reign of God.

Today's lessons help us to understand what the will of God is. The will of God is love, love for everyone, love for all of us no matter what happens, what we do in our lives.

The chosen people had been unfaithful. Their temple was destroyed and they were driven into exile, yet God assures them through Isaiah that God still loves them and God assures them that God's blessings are still there for them to grasp. "Come here, all you who are thirsty. Come to the water. All of you who have no money, come."

See, it doesn't take anything to enter into God's love. God's love is always present. God's love is always faithful.

In the psalm that we recited after our first lesson, Psalm 145, "Great is God, most worthy of praise. God's deeds of love are beyond measure." The psalmist is assuring us that God's will is love, compassion. "Gracious is God. Slow to anger, abounding in love. God is good to everyone. God's mercy embraces all creation." It could not be more clear, what God is telling us about God, that God is love.

Of course, St. Paul in our second lesson today, had experienced that love of God. When we read this passage, we might think that when Paul says, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" that he's talking about how we love God, but it isn't that at all. See, Paul had experienced God's loving hand, as he tells in another part, his letters, he was a sinner. He tried to destroy the community of Jesus. He put people to death, threw them in prison, but then God's love captured him and he realized that no matter what he had done, God loved him.

That's why he cries out today, "What shall we say after this? If God is with us, who can be against us? Who shall separate us from the love of Jesus? Will it be trials or anguish, persecution or hunger, lack of clothing, dangers or sword? No. Thanks to God who has loved us, nothing can separate us from that love."

He goes on and concludes, "I am certain, neither death nor life, neither angels nor spiritual powers, not any creature whatsoever, can ever separate us from the love of God, which we know and have in Jesus Christ, our Lord."

So the reign of God is when the will of God is manifest in our lives, when we live according to God's will, which is the way of love.

In our gospel lesson today, it's almost like a parable that's acted out. Instead of telling us a story today, Jesus shows us the love of God. It's easy to picture that scene, and I remind you again, it was right after Jesus had heard the terrible news about John the Baptist, someone he loved very much, so he tried to go apart by himself to grieve and deal with his grief. He wanted to be alone; he went to a secluded place, but the people knew where he was going so they went around the shore of the lake, got there first, and were there when he came.

Does Jesus get upset and angry? No. Matthew tells us his heart was filled with compassion. Jesus is God's love made visible, made present in our world, and no matter what, that love of God is always there. This is the reign of God, God's love present.

Of course, then Jesus shows us that love in a very concrete way. The disciples come and people are hungry, they're tired: "Send them to the villages." That's not the way of God. Don't send them away, do something yourselves. If the reign of God is going to happen, then you, my disciples, have to reach out in love. So when they say, "Send them away," Jesus says, "No; you do something."

They have that excuse, which probably all of us would have: "We don't have enough. What can we do?" "What do you have?" "Five loaves, two fishes." So Jesus blesses them. We presume, I guess, that somehow after he blesses them, there's a big mound of loaves and fishes so they get distributed. No, that isn't what the gospel says.

The gospel says Jesus blessed them, the disciples took them and began to distribute them. What do you think was happening? The love of God was spreading. Everybody began to share -- that's what the love of God is, when we all reach out in love to one another, when we live according to God's will, and that will of God is love.

When we submit ourselves to God's will, enter into God's love, the reign of God breaks forth.

If all of us really lived according to this way, the reign of God would come into its fullness. Of course we live in a world where that hasn't happened, and maybe all of us will say, "What can I do? I'm only one person. I don't have all of the resources." That's what the disciples said and Jesus said, 'That's okay. Whatever you have, I will bless it. You begin to share it, and the reign of God will spread from you to someone else and it will keep spreading.'

This past week, someone sent me a bulletin from another parish, Christ the Good Shepherd Parish in Lincoln Park. They sent it to me because a friend of mine had gone there to speak to the middle school kids.

This was the summertime, but they were having a day camp for a week and they had different programs for the kids each day. This particular day is what's in the bulletin. This person went, a retired nurse, who had often volunteered in Haiti. "She spoke to the summer campers and to a few interested parishioners about the reality that faces our Haitian brothers and sisters each day.

"Her presentation really made all who heard her talk realize how really blessed we are. She began by showing the campers a map of the country, locating the island in the Caribbean. She then took them on an imaginary trip. She asked them to imagine living without electricity. What would you have to give up? So the kids began to think about that.

"Taking the carpet off their floors, the doors off their houses, what adjustment that might entail. Living without a car or a bicycle, having very few choices in food, that is, even if there is enough food. Expecting to live 49 years, the life expectancy of people in Haiti. Then she encouraged the kids, 'Share what you have for these people who are hungry, in a desert like the people were in the gospel.'"

So what did the kids do? They had a car wash and raised $1,016.43 - not a lot, but it was what they had, so they sent it so that the parish in Haiti would have more money to provide the food program that feeds 1,000 children every day, and where a clinic is being built so that the kids in that slum area begin to get health care.

There's a marvelous example of how the reign of God can happen. Those children began to understand: People are in need. Whatever we have may not be a lot, but what we have, share it. That's making the reign of God happen. It's God's love breaking forth into our world, through the good that we do. Every one of us in this church this morning can begin to make the reign of God happen. You might say, "I don't have very much," and of course, you don't, but what you have, begin to share, and that spirit can spread. That's what Jesus tells us in the gospel.

More than 5,000 people were fed that day because the reign of God began to break forth. Just imagine what will happen when every one of us begins to share more fully and generously what we have -- how that reign of God will begin to spread. Finally, at some point, the reign of God will come into its fullness and every person on this earth, our whole planet, will be blessed and enriched because we come under the rule of God, which is the rule of love.

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

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