

## Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Oct. 2, 2008 The Peace Pulpit

I must confess that when I was reflecting on the gospel lesson and the other scriptures, but especially the gospel lesson, I had to smile because I've had the experience rather recently of being invited to a Diocese where I was to give a retreat at a retreat house for a weekend. The bishop called me and said, "I don't want you to come." His reason was, "You know, Tom, you're controversial and there'll be media there." That's when I smiled or even laughed to myself. First of all, I've never had the experience, in the dozens of times that I've given retreats at retreat houses, that the media are the least bit interested in covering such an event.

Even more, I had to smile because somehow, being controversial is evidently something not very admirable or acceptable and yet, listen to today's gospel. Who could be more controversial than Jesus? I must tell you what happened just before the event of today's gospel. This was the week when Jesus had come into the temple, knocked over the tables, drove out the buyers and the sellers and said, "Don't make God's house a den of thieves" and he made them scatter and run. Pretty controversial, I would think. The leaders, the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the temple authorities, were not the least bit happy about it.

Then Jesus came back and he begins to teach there at the temple precincts, and he heals people, and he draws crowds. That's why they're coming and saying to him "By what authority do you do this?" Then, Jesus pushes them even further. He asks them about John the Baptist and asked the question, "Was John really sent by God or not?" if John's baptism was a work of God or not. As we heard in the Gospel, they began to think right away, "Okay, if we say it was a work of God, well then, why didn't you listen to John and follow him? If we say it isn't, then watch out for the people because they recognize John as a prophet." They simply refused to answer, "We don't know."

They did not want to tell Jesus about John. Jesus is really pushing these religious leaders, confronting them, and to put it mildly, was being very controversial. Then he goes on as we hear in the gospel and poses further a question for them. He tells them the short parable about the two sons, one who is asked by the father, "Go into my vineyard," and the son says, "No, I won't," but then later thinks better of it and goes. The other one, "Oh, I'll go, I'll go." He doesn't go. It's easy, which one is doing the will of God, of the father in this story?

Of course, the Pharisees, the leaders, have to say, "Well, it's the first one who really does the will of God. That's the one who said, 'No, I won't,' fails to respond positively, is disobedient, or at least says he will be, but then has a change of mind and heart and goes and does it. Obviously, he's the one that is doing the will of the father." Jesus then, of course, makes a very quick application, and one that challenges these religious leaders in an extraordinary way. He begins to talk about the tax collectors.

These are people who are public sinners because they're cooperating with the Roman authorities, they're traitors to their own people, and they also are dealing in Roman money and having a lot of commerce and business exchanges with those with whom a Jew, who is faithful, would not even associate. Jesus says about them, "They're on the way to heaven more than you are. They are the ones who are on the way to the kingdom." He includes here the prostitutes, people whose lives are shattered by sin, and yet these are the ones who are like that first son. They weren't following God's ways, but now they change and they're willing to follow God's ways.

That's why Jesus associates with these people. He has meals with the Pharisees, Scribes, the leaders. They're sinners, how can he have meals with sinners? He eats with them, but Jesus is saying that 'these are the ones that are on the way to the Kingdom of Heaven before you, who think you are holy and claim to be doing God's will, but you're not.' There are many ways in which we can apply these scriptures. The very first, I think, is for people who, perhaps at different times in their lives, begin to feel discouraged because they think they have not been faithful.

Their lives, perhaps, are not shining examples of love and goodness and generosity and kindness and patience. Perhaps they even married outside the church, lived outside the bounds of the church law for years. They feel badly about themselves. Well, Jesus is saying, "Look you may well be on the way to the Kingdom of Heaven before the others who appear to be so good," but maybe like the scribes, the Pharisees, the Jewish leaders, are not. You go back to that first lesson today where the chosen people, in exile, because they had been unfaithful to God and they had fallen into sin.

They began to complain to God: "Yahweh's way is not just," and God says, "Why, Israel, is my position wrong? Is it not, rather, that yours is wrong?" They thought their sin was unforgivable, but God says, "If the righteous person dies after turning from the person's righteous deeds and sinning, yes, that person dies because of the sins. But If the wicked person does what is good and right after turning from the sins, that person will be saved. That person will live and not die because that person has opened their eyes and turned from the sins they had committed."

See, what God is telling us, and Jesus is making it so clear, once you begin to realize your sinfulness and are open to Jesus, being willing to follow him, change your ways and follow him, no sin is unforgivable. It's a very hopeful message for all of us. Be ready to acknowledge your sinfulness, be open to God, open to the ways of Jesus, willing to change your life, and you will be flooded with God's mercy, God's love.

That's the first thing we can learn from today's scriptures, but there's another part of it that I think is especially important for us at this particular time when we're listening to these scriptures. Part of the problem of the Jewish leaders was they were so quick to judge others. 'You prostitute, you publicans, you tax collectors, you're not worthy to come into the precincts of God's temple.' They make that judgment. Isn't it true that we hear, and it's come up again this week, where people are saying to members of our church, "You can't receive communion"? A bishop has said that to Senator Joseph Biden in his home diocese, where he was born and grew up-not welcome to receive Holy Communion.

Other people are being turned away. It simply is not right, because sometimes people like this, that we could so easily name as sinners, perhaps are further on the way to the reign of God than those who think themselves worthy of the Eucharist. There's more to being approved by God than simply trying to follow what we think of

as the rules imposed upon us or provided to us by the Church. What God is asking of us is that we really begin to be on the way to the Kingdom of Heaven. I have to remind us, this is not a place somewhere where God lives.

The Kingdom of Heaven is the reign of God. The realm of those who are trying to follow God's will, trying to transform our world into a place where all of creation is subject to God's will and following God's will. Of course, the issue that has caused some people to be rejected from communion is the issue of abortion, but sometimes, perhaps we can overcome that terrible evil more effectively, not by trying to change the law and deciding anyone who isn't ready to change that law is not worthy of communion, but by trying to build the reign of God.

Trying to change the situation so that people will not be forced into that very terrible situation where they feel constrained to do something which they know would be wrong. During the times when people were able to receive more social services, where there were opportunities for employment that paid just wages, where people could have a life that was enriched by a social justice system that provided for the needs of all, abortions go down.

We could be on the way to God's realm, the Kingdom of God, by trying to change our society into a just society where everyone has a full opportunity, a complete opportunity for a full life. That has proved true in the past. When the social services, the job situation, employment situation, just wages are provided, when these things are there, abortions go down.

If we really want to be on the way to God's kingdom, if we want to be the one who does the will of God, as Jesus had challenged people before, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the realm of God, but those who do the will of God." If we are trying to do this will of God, make the realm of God or the reign of God happen.

Even if we are not actively trying to change a law that is evil, but trying to change a situation so the people will not be forced into doing something they would not want to do if they were free. Jesus, I think, in today's gospel makes it very clear that it is those who are on the way to the Kingdom of Heaven who are doing the will of God and will be blessed.

All of us must be careful not to judge others, not to rule other people out of the Church, but also each of us must try to do the will of God as proclaimed by Jesus, as lived out by Jesus. Here we are challenged very much by the second lesson today, where Paul, in writing to the church at Philippi, is describing Jesus as one who though he was god, a human as all of us, made in the image of God, did not think that to be something to cling to, but rather was willing to empty himself, open himself to being fully human, even subject to death and even to ignominious death on the cross.

In other words, Jesus was one who was willing to pour forth his life, suffer and die for others. Therefore, God exalted him, raised him up. We too, much try to, as Paul says, "Have that attitude, that mind of Jesus who was willing to be humbled, even to suffer, even to be put to death, and therefore be exalted by God." When we're ready to enter into the life, suffering, and death of Jesus, then God too will raise us up with Jesus and we will be as those people in the gospel that Jesus obviously loves and cherishes.

The sinners described as the tax collectors, the publicans, the prostitutes-like them, we will be on the way to the Kingdom of Heaven. We will be the ones who will be changing our world to become truly the realm of God, where the will of God is fully carried out and the blessings of God are poured forth upon us and upon the whole of our planet, the whole of the human race. The reign of God will be breaking forth when we follow this way of Jesus.

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