

Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Oct. 16, 2008 The Peace Pulpit

As always when we reflect on the scriptures during our liturgy, we must today reflect on these scriptures in the light of what will be happening during this liturgy. As we mentioned at the beginning, today we will baptize the newest member of our community, this tiny infant, Alexander Golden. And then also at the end of the liturgy, members of our Pax Christi group will be renewing their vow of nonviolence, a commitment to follow Jesus, the peacemaker, who rejected all violence. It's within the context of these events that we listen to the lessons today.

The parable that Jesus tells in the gospel is also told in the Gospel of Luke. It's the same parable, but it has a different setting and a bit of a different meaning, so I want to share with you ideas from both of these parables. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus tells the parable this way. He's gathered at a banquet in a rich pharisee's house and he's speaking to the guests and then one of them says, upon hearing the words of Jesus, "Happy are those who eat at the banquet in the kingdom of God," and he's thinking, probably, of the afterlife.

He's thinking of the promises like in the first lesson that we heard today, where Isaiah describes that banquet. "On this mountain God will prepare for all peoples a feast of rich food and choice wine. On this mountain God will destroy the pall passed over all peoples, the very shroud spread over all nations, and death will be no more." We're into the afterlife, the time after this world. This man who said that really didn't understand what Jesus had been preaching and doing. That's why Jesus tells the parable in Luke's Gospel.

He wants them to realize: "No, the reign of God is not going to happen later on. The reign of God is happening right now," Jesus is telling them through his parable. And in this parable in Luke's Gospel, it's less complicated than in Mathew's. Jesus just says, "A man was having a feast and he invited guests, but they made excuses and didn't come."

I'm sure you remember. Some said, "I just got a field, I have to go farm it." Others said, "I bought some new animals. I have to try them out." Another man said, "I just got married. I have to be with my wife." They made one excuse after another and none of them came.

And then in that parable, Jesus says, "Go off and get anyone you find on the streets, bring them in," and that's what Jesus had been doing, actually. He had been eating regularly with those from the streets, with those that others called "sinners," the publicans, and the prostitutes. These were the ones that Jesus was gathering around him.

He wasn't talking about the afterlife. He was saying, "The reign of God is happening right now. Look at what I'm doing. The downtrodden are being set free. The poor are being made rich, and the rich are being cast down," the words of Mary in the Magnificat. That was happening and Jesus wanted those people gathered at that feast to understand that the reign of God is right now.

So when we baptize this baby, we're baptizing the baby into our community. All of us will take responsibility, together with the parents and the godparents, of raising this child according to the teachings of Jesus, the way of love. We will be bringing this child into a community that is trying right now to make the reign of God happen by reaching out to the poor, setting the downtrodden free, bring the blind new sight, healing the brokenhearted. That has to happen right now.

In the other parable, the one you hear in Mathew's gospel, it's a slight bit different. Jesus has the setting as a marriage feast this time, and the king is celebrating this feast for his son,. Two groups of servants are sent out; both are rejected, and put to death even. That, of course, to the hearers, and when Matthew put this parable into his gospel some 50 years after Jesus had been executed, they would think immediately, Yes, the king is God, Jesus was the son, the servants were the prophets -- the Hebrew prophets and the Christian prophets -- and the son was murdered.

Jesus is telling the parable on that occasion in a way of reminding that church of Matthew, a slight history, a mini history of their church, of their community. Matthew was putting this into the gospel at a time when the community had begun to be somewhat complacent and forgotten the thrill of making the reign of God happen, of reaching out to the poor and the downcast and the oppressed and drawing them in. Matthew was telling the parable to a community that needed to be energized, made aware once more of what the work of the Christian community is.

We don't baptize a baby just so that we can save that baby's soul. We baptize this baby and we draw other people into our community always, so that we can continue to be a community that is making the reign of God happen. Of course, this community is doing that every day. We serve the poor from the streets here at this church and you also reach out to poor people in other parts of the world, in Haiti. I just came back from Haiti on Friday and I must tell you that I hope you will renew your efforts to support the people of Haiti.

You may not be aware of it, but three of the recent hurricanes struck that island, one across the city of Gonaives, and there were floods over six to eight feet that came down the mountain, poured through the city, just took houses totally away. I visited a tent city where people are living in tents that the United Nations has provided.

But everywhere I went in Haiti, I saw greater poverty than I've ever seen before. The infrastructure of the country is in collapse. It's really devastated. You here at this church try to make the reign of God happen by having a twin parish in Haiti that you support and I urge you again, this is the work of Jesus. This is making the reign of God happen. So renew your efforts, increase your efforts, make them more generous than ever.

Finally, in the parable today, Jesus, in the last part of the one in Matthew, says the king (who is God), comes into the banquet, finds one person without a wedding garment. This will always, I'm sure, when we hear it, strike us as very harsh. The first thing we should remember is that that person had no reason not to have a wedding garment. When such an event happened, there would be a large supply of festive robes that people

would put on.

There were many people there from the streets and only one did not have the wedding garment. Again, Matthew was trying to get his community, and we must be aware of the same thing, to understand that we are accountable to God. The gift of baptism is the gift of new life that we receive, the mission that we get, to make the reign of God happen. We're accountable for that. That's what Matthew was trying to get across, where he says that the king comes in and rebukes the person without the wedding garment.

It's a great responsibility to be baptized, to accept the gift of baptism, and to participate, as we will today in accepting responsibility for this infant. It's a responsibility that God will hold us accountable for. Not that we have to be afraid of anything, but only that we accept the responsibility. The wedding garment would be the symbol of being ready when God comes in judgment. "When I was hungry, you gave me to eat. When I was thirsty, you gave me to drink. When I was naked, you clothed me. When I was in prison, you visited me."

Remember that from Matthew's gospel in the 25th chapter. That's what God is holding us accountable for, so we must all put on our wedding garments and make sure that we carry out this responsibility.

At the end of our liturgy today, when our Pax Christi members renew their vow of nonviolence, I hope that even though you're not a member of Pax Christi, you will listen carefully to that vow, because it's really just the fifth chapter of Matthew's gospel, the beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount.

But it includes what is also very important for us if we're going to make the reign of God happen. We pledge ourselves to abolish war and the causes of war from the face of the earth. That's part of making the reign of God happen. Even if you're not a member of Pax Christi, I hope you'll begin to think about making that part of your life, that you will work to abolish war and the causes of war on the face of the earth.

Truly the lessons today remind us of the serious responsibility of being a follower of Jesus. We welcome this infant today, we accept responsibility of raising him according to the teachings of Jesus, the law of love. I hope that all of us will renew our commitment to do this, to be a member of the community of disciples of Jesus, making the reign of God happen, here and now, by reaching out to the poor, welcoming them into our community, feeding them every day, by reaching out to the people of Haiti, by working to end war and the causes of war. That's the commitment we must make if we truly hear God's word today.

[Bishop Gumbleton preached this homily at St. Leo Parish in Detroit, Mich., where he had formerly served as pastor.]

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