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Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Feb. 19, 2009 The Peace Pulpit

St. Paul gives us a very difficult challenge today: ?Be imitators of me as I am of Christ.? First of all, he?s very bold in kind of saying how he himself had begun to imitate Christ, but then he challenges us to imitate him as he imitates Christ, even though, I?m sure at the time, Paul didn?t think he had perfectly imitated Jesus, but he was trying and that?s what he?s asking of us -- to do the best we can in trying to imitate Jesus. If we listen carefully to the lessons today, I think we?ll discover what a challenge it is to be like Jesus.

I might interject this also. More than 50 years ago, I made a promise of celibacy because I wanted to be ordained a priest, and it was presented to me as a great challenge, very difficult, and a higher state of life. But because we are celebrating today, the love vows of married people over 10, 20, 30, 40, even 50 and 60-some years as listed in the bulletin, I can say without any hesitation, that I have come to learn that it?s much more difficult to imitate Jesus and follow Jesus within that loving relationship of marriage than it would be for what used to be thought of as a higher state of celibacy, so I truly congratulate all of you who are here celebrating and showing us how beautiful love can be when lived within the bonds of marriage.

It?s there that I think the greatest challenge comes to imitating Jesus. The first thing that we discover if we probe today?s lessons is something about Jesus that could be easily missed, where Mark tells us how this man who was doomed to be an outcast, pushed outside the community, having to live alone, no one to support him, and when he comes before Jesus as he?s even forbidden to do (he?s not supposed to come close to anyone), he has to cry out, ?Unclean! Unclean! Stay away!? He comes up to Jesus, and Mark says, ?Jesus was moved with compassion.? That?s a very important word, and ?compassion? doesn?t really do full justice to its meaning.

What Mark is telling us is Jesus was moved with what we might call a gut-wrenching emotion. He was disturbed in the deepest part of his being, overwhelmed with this emotion at the terrible catastrophe that he was seeing in front of him -- this man, ill, but pushed away -- so Jesus reacts with what we, again, would call gut-wrenching, deep emotion.

That?s something that we need to develop, deeper within ourselves, I believe, the ability to really become passionate, which means to be with another in that person?s passion, suffering. Be with that person, feel.

I know some people who do seem to have this kind of reaction when they?re confronted, as all of us are at times, with terrible tragedies in the world. We all read about starvation going on in various parts of the world. We read about bombings that took place in Gaza a couple weeks ago and killed men, women and children in far greater numbers than any military people. That?s happening in many different parts of the world. We read about it, but how many of us really feel disturbed, deep within ?my gut,? if you wish to put it that way? So disturbed that we try to do something about it.

I think a lot of the tragedy in the world continues to go on because not enough of us have that deep emotion that Jesus had when he saw this kind of suffering. So to imitate Jesus, we must begin to develop a deeper sense of compassion, feeling with another person, what that person is suffering, undergoing. That?s very important and

it?s difficult. It?s much easier to brush it aside and say, ?Yeah, I?m sorry, but what can I do?? and that sort of thing. So that?s the first thing that challenges us if we?re going to imitate Jesus.

A second thing would be how, for Jesus, there are no ins and outs; everybody is included. Many of us live in ways in our society, in our world, where we do have those who are in and those who are out, and we don?t try to break down the barriers. We allow it to go on, even within our church, let alone within society.

A couple weeks ago, I saw a movie on television (maybe some of you did too) called ?Prayers for Joey.? It was a documentary movie based on a true incident about a young man who had actually been pushed away, out of his family, because he was gay. He was pushed away from church because he was gay. He finally committed suicide and at that point, his mother, who was the strongest one pushing him away because she misunderstood the scriptures, really, took it upon herself to try to break down that barrier within our society or within our church

We are to become inclusive like Jesus. That man was not supposed to come close to Jesus; Jesus was not supposed to touch him, but he did. He broke down the barrier. He said, ?You are included.?

Could we do the same thing, or we have, getting over it to a large extent, but then again within our society and within our church, on the basis of race. There was a time in our church where bishops, religious orders, owned slaves, treated people as property, pushed them out. We?ve come a long way, but maybe not totally yet, in our attitudes and in the way we act within our society and in our church.

The third way that we have ins and outs -- and this is especially true within the church. It was not very long ago when a woman couldn?t read the scriptures during Mass. It wasn?t like this morning, where a woman did read the scriptures. That was not possible in our church until very recently. There was a barrier there at the beginning of the sanctuary -- a woman could not cross that barrier and be up here at the pulpit, reading the scriptures, the word of God.

We still have ways that we exclude women in our church from full equality, full rights. We have ins and outs, and that?s what Jesus said can?t be.

When Jesus allowed that man to touch him, he was breaking the law -- you heard it from Moses. But Jesus knew that there was no greater law than the law of love. You can have a human law that says certain people are out, other people are in, but for Jesus, that law is wrong. There is nobody out, nobody in; we are all one in Christ, and therefore all the same as sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus.

These are the kinds of things that we must reflect on now and pray over as we try to do what Paul says, ?Be imitators of me as I am imitating Jesus.? Each of us must leave here today, having prayed for the grace to go out into our world and truly imitate Jesus.

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