

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Jul. 30, 2009 The Peace Pulpit

In our second lesson today, St. Paul exhorted us, "I, Paul, the prisoner of the Lord, urge you to live the vocation you have received," and that really is what we must try to reflect on this morning as we listen to the scripture lessons -- how these lessons can guide us to live the vocation we have received. First of all in our reflection, I think it's very important to remind ourselves that in this instance, when we hear the word "vocation," it's not something specific, like a call to the priesthood, which we often think of as a vocation, or to the religious life, that's a vocation in the church.

No; what Paul is asking us to do is to be faithful to the vocation -- the call that you got and that I got, every one of us got and the commitment that we made, or was made for us, at baptism -- the vocation, the call to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. To take very seriously who he is, what he taught, what his values are and to live them. These lessons give us very important guidance in this call to be a disciple of Jesus.

Today's Readings
2 Kings 4:42-44
Psalm 145:10-11, 15-16, 17-18
Ephesians 4:1-6
John 6:1-15
Full text of the readings

The first thing that I notice, and it's remarked more clearly in the other accounts of this multiplication of the loaves and fishes, where Jesus looks out at that crowd, and in Mark's gospel, the same story, Mark says he had compassion on these people. They were like (and Jesus said this), "sheep without a shepherd," and they were hungry at this moment. So Jesus entered into their feelings, had compassion for them, and immediately wanted to do something for them.

And the way it is with us, that our first response is a compassionate response, when we're being urged to reach out to those in need. You may recall, a couple of weeks ago, Pope Benedict published an encyclical letter on Catholic social teaching. It's a continuation of over 100 years now of modern Catholic social teaching, and it was written up in *The Michigan Catholic* and in the secular papers also.

Benedict was calling upon us to have a concern for the common good, and was calling upon us to have a willingness to share what we have, and calling upon us to be aware that as disciples of Jesus, there are limits on what we have a right to as our own private property. Well, in *The Michigan Catholic* last week, there was a letter to the editor: "Did I read this right regarding Michael Hovey's editor's note in response to a letter to the editor? Do you mean to say that if I get an education, work hard, own a home (private property), have savings, et cetera, I'm obligated to allow a homeless, drug-addicted criminal to come to my house, take what he wants? I don't think so," the letter writer says.

And of course, the letter writer is exaggerating. No one ever said that someone could come into your house and take whatever they want, but that letter writer also exhibits a lack of compassion, as though every homeless, poor person is a drug-addicted, no good, lazy person. Not true! And if we only have a compassion like Jesus, we would quickly recognize that. You know, I'm sure, all of you, that I was pastor of St. Leo's parish for many

years, and we had a soup kitchen there. They still serve over 300 people every day, a warm, full meal.

I used to go down there sometimes and talk to the people and I never found one who was like the person this letter writer is describing. Many of them were veterans whose lives had been broken by the trauma of war, and they needed someone to be compassionate to them. I think this is the very first thing we must try to be aware of as we listen to today's lesson. Jesus shows us that he always feels with people, gets to understand them, wants to know about them, to reach out to them, and that's the spirit we must have also.

In fact, if you look in your bulletin today, you'll find an article about St. Aloysius Outreach Center in downtown Detroit, so if you want to have a way to express your compassion, just follow what's in that article, follow up on that and reach out to the homeless and the poor and the jobless in our own area. But we have to go beyond that too. In June this year, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization published a report that indicated that one-sixth of the people on our planet are now desperately hungry -- one-sixth.

The hardest hit live in the developing world, 642 million people severely malnourished in the areas of Asia and the Pacific. But the report also pointed out that developed countries are not immune. Some 15 million go wanting in the richest countries of the world. This crisis, the report says, is not due to poor harvests, insufficient food, but global economic slowdown, coupled with persistently high prices has pushed some 100 million more people into chronic hunger and poverty in this present year.

Something terrible is happening in our world. An ever-increasing number of people are becoming desperately hungry. They're dying. Every five minutes, a child dies of hunger and malnutrition. In the gospel lesson in Mark's account of this same event, the disciples first of all say to Jesus, "Well, what can we do? There are so many here who are hungry and we have so little," but Jesus doesn't let them get away with that, does he?

He says to them, and in John's gospel, it's pointed out by Andrew, "There's a little boy here that has five loaves and two fishes. Still, what's that among so many?" Jesus again doesn't say, "Oh, well then you can't do anything." No. He says, "Do what you can. Take the five loaves and two fish, bring them to me and we'll see what can happen," so they do, and of course, then we hear what happens. Jesus blesses them and then he himself, in John's gospel, distributes them to everyone who is hungry.

In Mark's gospel it's the disciples -- Jesus has them distribute the food. That's a better example for us, I think, because he's saying to us, in effect, "Okay, you can do something, every one of you." First of all, maybe it will just take some effort on our part to become more aware of what's going on in our world, how in one year, 100 million more people have become severely malnourished, are dying of hunger.

Your reaction, my reaction, probably at first is, "What can I do?" Well, as I say, first of all, try to find out about what is happening. Try to find out what are the reasons behind it, and they're not so esoteric that we can't find out. Once we find out what's behind it, then we can begin to work to make something happen to bring about change. That's what the scriptures call us to today, to begin to be aware, to be compassionate, to have feeling for those who are desperately in need. Those in our own community, those in other parts of our country, those in other parts of the world. Give immediately what we can share, but then begin to work for change.

Perhaps you've heard it expressed, sometimes an interpretation of this event in the desert, or wherever it happened, because different gospel accounts describe different places, that really the miracle was that when Jesus took those five loaves and two fish and began to share them, everybody else in the crowd followed that example. They reached into their robes and they brought out what they had brought and they began to give it, to share it, until everybody had enough and there were 12 baskets full of pieces of loaves left over.

That's a rather striking way to interpret this event, but the only trouble with it is there's nothing in the gospel to really say that's what happened, but wouldn't that be a miracle, and wouldn't it be a miracle if every one of us

who is in this church this morning left here with the determination that we're going to reach into our pockets figuratively and give away some of what we have that's in excess of what we need?

Try to make sure that others benefit from the extra blessings that we have, and that every one of us would begin to try to search out the reasons why so many people in our world are desperately hungry, and then begin to do something about it. That would be a miracle, I think, and it's a miracle that I think could happen if all of us listen deeply, carefully, to what God speaks to us today and leave this church with the determination to make a miracle happen.

[This homily was preached at St. Hilary Parish in Redford, Mich.]

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