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Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Aug. 13, 2009 The Peace Pulpit

To reflect on today?s lessons, it?s very important, I think, to remind ourselves of the context in which these lessons come to us this morning. You may remember this year, we have been following the gospel of Mark, but then suddenly a couple of Sundays ago, we turned to John?s gospel for the account of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes in the desert place. That is also in Mark, but we skipped over to John?s gospel, and then for four Sundays (this is the second Sunday after that), we are reflecting, as Jesus did, on what happened when Jesus fed them in the desert.

So we have this long discourse that Jesus gives about the bread of life, and you may remember, in the way John describes that event in the desert, it?s very clearly John?s presentation of what happened at the Last Supper, where Jesus took that bread and wine and said those words, ?This is my body, given for you. This is the cup of my blood, poured out for you,? the institution of the Holy Eucharist. In John?s gospel, at the Last Supper account, it doesn?t appear there; it appears in this gospel in chapter six, where Jesus used those very words that you find at the Last Supper.

Today's Readings

1 Kings 19:4-8
Psalm 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7, 8-9
Ephesians 4:30-5:2
John 6:41-51

Full text of the readings

?Jesus took bread, looked to heaven, blessed it, broke it, gave thanks and then distributed it to all the people. The Last Supper scene is in the sixth chapter of John?s gospel, and now we are in the midst of this teaching of Jesus about the Blessed Sacrament. And last Sunday, the gospel emphasized the part of it that we listened to of this discourse, when Jesus said, ?I am the living bread. Whoever eats this bread eats me.? He was making it very clear he was present in the bread and the wine of the Eucharist, that presence that we adore when we go into a church and genuflect to the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle.

Jesus is making clear the real presence, a truth that we have maintained within the Roman Catholic tradition ever since that first time Jesus did it, that he is truly present under those forms of bread and wine. In fact, I?m sure all of us who grew up in the period of time before the second Vatican council had very clear memories of how we so esteemed that bread and wine because it is the body and blood of Jesus, but wouldn?t touch it. And how many worried when you made your first Holy Communion, ?What if it sticks in my mouth? How am I going to move it if I can?t touch it??

We had that very profound esteem and reverence. We worship Jesus under those forms of bread and wine. But in today?s gospel, we move a little bit beyond that and it?s very important to notice that Jesus is saying, toward the end of today?s gospel, ?The bread I shall give is my flesh and I will give it for the life of the world.? He?s reminding us that the blessed sacrament isn?t just something to be adored; it?s not just the real presence of Jesus. He?s reminding us that there, at the Last Supper, he literally was pouring out his life for the world out of love.

The blessed sacrament, which contains the death and resurrection of Jesus, is not just something to be adored, something to be imitated. Jesus pours forth his life from the cross. It?s not something to appease an angry God;

it?s a pouring forth of love, so Jesus is instructing us about the blessed sacrament -- that is, we receive it as we eat the bread and drink from the cup. We must commit ourselves to pouring forth ourselves for the life of the world.

The other lessons today help us to realize this truth about the blessed sacrament, how it calls us to action. That lesson from the book of Kings, we stop it today, in the passage that we hear, after Elijah has eaten the bread, the food that was provided, and drank the water, he was able to go on for 40 days and 40 nights until he reached Mt. Horeb or Mt. Sinai. It seems to indicate, if you connect it with the Blessed Sacrament, that the Blessed Sacrament is the food that strengthens us, nurtures us, comforts us, and now all of that is true.

But if you go on with this passage about Elijah, you discover (and I?m sure we remember this because it?s such a beautiful passage) when he gets to Mt. Horeb, he goes into a cave and then remember how there was lightning and there was a terrible storm, and there was an earthquake and God was in none of those? Then the murmur of the wind, the almost silent movement of the wind, and God was there, and God spoke to Elijah. It?s interesting what God says to Elijah: ?Leave here.?

See Elijah had made this long trip from south to Mt. Horeb, trying to escape and when he gets there, God says, ?No, you have to go north all the way up to Damascus, and there you?re going to begin to act because of the nourishment you received from the bread that you ate. Now you have to begin to act until Elijah is called to go anoint a new king in Damascus, enter into the life of the society of which he was part, try to change it.? The current king was unfaithful and God wanted a new king for the people, so Elijah is being sent forth to change what was happening.

Even more, when you listen to what Paul says to us this morning when he says, ?Do not sadden the holy spirit of God, which you were marked with,? be open to this spirit, and really change the way you are. ?Do away with all quarrelling, rage, anger, insults, every kind of malice. Change your whole being. ?Mutually forgiving one another as God forgave you in Jesus,? Paul says, ?As most beloved sons and daughters of God, strive to imitate God. Follow the way of love, the example of Jesus who loved you. Follow the way of love.?

This is what we?re called to as we receive the body and blood of Jesus at this Eucharist. It?s to change us, to enable us to follow the way of love, to become involved in the world in which we live, to make it a world transformed by the very love of God, which we bring to it. There are very practical ways in which we must try to do that, I think, especially if we remind ourselves of the circumstances of the world in which we live. There are so many ways in which we have to change things if we?re going to follow the way of love.

If I were not here this morning, I would instead be in Chicago at the SNAP Convention. That?s the convention of the Survivors? Network of those Abused by Priests. I?m part of that group and I try always to attend their conventions, but this year, I?ve chosen to come here. You were scheduled first. [Applause] I just bring that up because there?s a wound in our church that we haven?t healed yet. It?s really a deep, deep wound that has been caused by those who were called to serve in ministries of leadership in the church, priests, and members of religious communities.

Members of our church, those even in leadership, violated children. We still haven?t healed. Sometimes, at least the bishops, try to give the impression that it?s all over, we?ve taken care of it, but that?s not true. The survivors still haven?t been really embraced and welcomed into the community, so many of them are still pushed away by the bishops who refused to accept responsibility for all that happened, to be held accountable. Sometimes I hear people saying to the bishop, ?Well, just forget it, move on, forgive,? but how can you forgive if the person who is responsible accepts no responsibility? Forgiveness has to be received and it can only be received by a person who admits responsibility.

Bishops in the Church and many of the priests I know have refused to be held accountable, so we still have this

open wound in the Church. If we?re going to walk the way of love or follow the way of love, we have to do everything we can to continue to change that, so that people will be held accountable and that forgiveness and reconciliation can really happen. But moving beyond what?s going on in the Church, there?s a couple of other things that are very current, that I think are important for us if we?re going to follow the way of love.

Have you been aware this past week of what?s been happening at forums that people from congress and the senate have been holding about health care? People are coming and they?re crying out in anger and hate, even giving death threats for those who are going to try to change our health care system so that it?s a system that reaches out to everybody. How can we continue to have 50 million people in this country who do not have access to good health care?

If you want a very vivid example of that, here is something that was written by Bill Moyers. You may remember that name; he was a commentator on public television programs. He described something he read in the paper. He said, ?This morning I read something reported in the paper on Carol Ann Reyes. Carol Ann Reyes is 63. She lives in Los Angeles, suffers from dementia and is homeless. Somehow she made her way to a hospital with serious, untreated needs. No details were provided as to what happened to her there, except that the hospital -- which is part of Kaiser Permanente, the largest HMO in the country -- called a cab and sent her back to skid row. True, they phoned ahead to workers at a rescue shelter to let them know she was coming. But some hours later a surveillance camera picked her up ?wandering around the streets in a hospital gown and slippers.? Dumped in America.?

That?s what we do to the elderly, the poor, the sick that we don?t want to stretch out for and reach out for to try to embrace in our health care system. Every other developed country in the world has universal health care, and we have people protesting and fighting against it, why? To me, it seems to be a deep kind of selfishness: ?I?ve got my health care and I don?t want it threatened by having to share it,? and we could do it; every other country does it., but somehow we don?t have that spirit of love. We?re not willing to go the way of love as a nation and provide this for all.

Another thing that comes to my mind, and I don?t want to keep going on and on here, but the homeless. The numbers are going up. In the city of Detroit, you see them on street corners. This morning, as I drove away from my place to come here, I passed the intersection where on two different corners, there are homeless people sitting there just hoping for someone to provide some help, and you see these people everywhere. The numbers have gone up tremendously. What?s even worse -- there?s evidence that more and more of the homeless people are being attacked and killed -- the numbers of homeless people being killed in our country, sometimes just by teenagers out to ?have fun,? they call it, killing homeless people, beating them to death. That?s what happens to homeless people in this country.

While I was in the chapel earlier, I couldn?t help but think how I went to the seminary here, a beautiful seminary, and I remembered a seminary in El Salvador, Archbishop Romero, and homeless people there in great numbers, refugees. He opened up the seminary grounds to the poor and the homeless. ?We?ll take care of you, provide you shelter.? This seminary becomes a place for conferences and retreats, which is good, but also a recreation center for the rich -- a golf course, hotel, banquet center. Why wouldn?t any other bishop in the world do what Oscar Romero did?

Why wouldn?t some bishop in this country do what he did, open up the empty facilities that we have, say the poor are welcome, the homeless. Again, the way of love. What Archbishop Romero did was extraordinary, but if you?re following the way of Jesus, it ought not to be so extraordinary. Maybe we need, as a church, to deepen our commitment to the poor and the homeless, to find the ways that we can reach out to them and welcome them among us, and share the blessings that we have in such abundance.

Finally, one more thing about the way of love -- you can?t be celebrating this Eucharist on this particular day,

August 9th, without being mindful of August 6th and August 9th, When our nation perpetrated one of the most terrible atrocities in all of history, the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. In eight seconds, 100,000 people were incinerated, tens of thousands left to die a slow, terrible death of radiation sickness, and then three days later, on the 9th of August, we did the same thing again. Right now we have a nation that is building more nuclear weapons. We have a nation that still has a policy to use those weapons.

You hear the leaders of our country say, ?Well, there?s nothing off the table,? when they?re talking about Iran or North Korea, ?nothing?s off the table.? They mean by that: ?If we had to, we?ll use those weapons again.? We?ve never repented of that sin of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as a people; we still have the weapons, we still have the attempt to use them. Isn?t that something that we need to be engaged in, trying to say if we?re going to follow the way of love, the way of Jesus, we have to rid our world of these weapons. President Obama made a pledge in Prague a few months ago that he wants to do that, but we don?t have an outpouring from the churches saying, ?Let?s promote what the President wants. Let?s get rid of these weapons.? It?s time that we did that if we?re going to follow the way of love.

This morning then, as we celebrate this eucharist, and especially as we come forward to receive the body and blood of Jesus, where he is truly present, the Jesus, son of God whom we adore, we must also say ?Amen? to that body and blood of Jesus with the commitment that our ?Amen? means ?yes, we?re going to leave here, go forth in the celebration of this eucharist to give ourselves, pour our ourselves in love as Jesus did: ?This is my body given for you. This is the cup of my blood poured out for you in love.?? So we must commit ourselves, follow the way of love, and bring about change in our world that will make the fullness of God?s life and love, and the joy and peace that God promises, happen for everybody.

[This homily was preached Aug. 9, at the St. John Retreat Center, Plymouth, Mich., as part of a retreat for the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Third Order of St. Francis.]

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