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Letting go of materialism, grasping the Reign of God

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

Over these past six or seven weeks, we have been listening to that sermon we call the Sermon on the Mount, the part of the Gospel where Jesus really sets forth his values of what he expects of his followers -- and a good part of this sermon has been a challenge for us to go beyond, to go deeper.

Most of us, I'm sure, learned the Ten Commandments very well. Some of us may still be able to recite those commandments, but this message that Jesus is giving us in this Gospel takes us beyond the commandments.

Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

A couple weeks ago Jesus said:

Isaiah 49:14-15

Psalm 62:2-3, 6-7, 8-9

You Corinthians was said of old, "Thou shalt not kill," but I say to you, "Do not even have anger in your heart toward a brother or sister. Even if one has offended you and you remember it when you pray." Matthew 6:24-34
"Do not bring your gift to offer your gift, leave your gift and go first and forgive. Be reconciled."

Full text of the readings

Jesus is taking us far beyond the commandments. He wants to go into our hearts and find the roots of what is wrong, what is evil and how we act evilly sometimes.

You've heard it said of old, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." I say to you, "Look into your heart and that's where it would start."

Today, Jesus is taking us in a sense beyond the seventh commandment, "Thou shalt not steal." He wants us not just to think about not stealing, not taking something from another that does not belong to us, not cheating or being dishonest.

He wants us to think about our relationship with the goods of the earth. How do we look upon all the creation that God has given to us? Do we see it as a gift, as something that really doesn't belong to any one of us?

Whatever we have, it's a gift from God ultimately. We can't earn it. It doesn't really become ours. Jesus wants us to go beyond that commandment, to go deeper.

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So in this Gospel, he tells us very plainly you cannot serve God and money. You can't make money the be-all and the end-all of your life if you want to serve God.

In Luke's Gospel where this same sermon is recorded, Jesus says: "Avoid greed of every kind. Do not be greedy, trying to get more and more, accumulate more and more wealth."

Then in the Gospel today, Jesus reminds us: "For look, after all, who can really add a day to your life, or who could add a cubit to your stature?"

Doesn't God take care of the birds of the air and the flowers of the field? Can't we trust that God will also take care of us without our being greedy, trying to accumulate more and more wealth for ourselves?

I'm sure that many of us become a little bit troubled. It almost sounds like you don't have to work anymore. God's going to take care of you. The flowers of the field don't toil or sow or anything like that and they're clothed beautifully.

The birds of the air don't sow or reap and yet they have enough. No, it isn't that God is asking us not to take care of ourselves and to be diligent. It's how we relate to the goods of the earth and to one another in the human family.

Probably the key line in today's Gospel is, "Seek first the reign of God, and God's righteousness or God's justice." If we really seek the reign of God, that means that we're working towards the day when everyone will have a full human life. Everyone will live in peace, fullness of life and joy. That's with the reign of God.

Jesus is telling us: "Seek that reign of God." Develop your relationships because God's righteousness or justice is about our relationships with one another.

That means we can't accumulate everything for ourselves. We really have to have a sense of what I have doesn't really belong to me. It's a gift from God. God could take it back at any moment. My life could be gone in a flash. So what Jesus is asking of us is to be aware not just of our own needs, but of one another, and of all our relationships with one another.

I have two examples here that I think will help to make clear what is this message of Jesus.

First is a very short letter that appeared in *America* magazine a week ago in response to an article that was laying out the teachings of Jesus about material goods.

The letter writer says:

I agree with *Bad Deal* [that's the title of the article] by Thomas Massero, when he calls for the increased teaching and honoring of Catholic social teaching, special concern for the poor and other value principles -- but the author's applications of these principles is questionable.

I do not know where government, Father Massero, or anyone else gets the right to decide when certain people have too much money and therefore have a moral obligation to turn over a larger share of their money to someone else.

And yet, you know that's exactly what Jesus is telling us. It's spelled out in Catholic social teachings so clearly. If we have more than we need when others lack the barest necessities, we don't have a right to that access. It belongs to them because God made the world for all and not for a few.

This is a hard teaching, and we really have to go deep within our hearts to hear Jesus saying this and to follow it, that what I have doesn't belong to me, if I have more than I need. It belongs to those who are in need, the desperate poor in our world.

The other example is just the opposite, and this happened over a year ago in Haiti. About 10 days after that terrible earthquake happened, friends of mine were there and I was down there myself, but this group went and this person described it like this:

This afternoon, feeling helpless, we decided to take a van down to Champs du Mars, the area around the palace which had totally been destroyed and where there were a huge number of people, tens of thousands of people, gathering there in this large, open space.

We went to look for people needing medical care, to bring them back to the guest house where we are staying, which has been transformed into a field hospital. Since we arrived in Port au Prince, everyone has told us that you cannot go to that area around the palace because of violence and insecurity, but I was in awe as we walked into the downtown area.

Among the flattened buildings, in the shadow of the fallen palace, amongst the swarms of displaced people, there was calm and solidarity. We wound our way through the camp asking for injured people who needed to get to the hospital.

Despite everyone having told us that as soon as we did this we would be mobbed by people, I was amazed as we approached each tent that people gently pointed us towards their neighbors, guiding us to those who were suffering the most. We picked up five badly injured people and drove them back to our field hospital.

What a difference. Some of us want to hang on to everything that we have, and here these people who are suffering from a terrible earthquake, they have nothing left, but they're looking out for others first.

They weren't mobbed by everybody trying to get out of the terrible situation they were in. They were pointing out those who needed help more. This is what Jesus is talking about when he is encouraging us to seek for the reign of God and God's righteousness.

If we begin to hold onto our own material goods very lightly -- realizing they're not really ours, they're a gift -- and we begin to find ways that we can share whatever we have, and if we always look for others who need things more than ourselves, we are beginning to make the reign of God happen.

As all of us do this more and more, we'll find being fulfilled what we pray in the Eucharistic Prayer and you'll hear these words in a few moments.

One day, Jesus will come again in the fullness of His glory. Then in His kingdom, they'll be no more suffering, no more tears, no more sadness.

You see, if we seek first the reign of God, this is what will happen: no more tears, no more suffering, no more sadness.

[Bishop Gumbleton gave this homily at St. Hilary Parish, Redford, Mich.]

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