

## Moving beyond our boundaries to welcome all

Thomas Gumbleton | Aug. 19, 2011 The Peace Pulpit

If we listen very carefully to the scriptures today, especially this gospel lesson, we will discover more about Jesus, especially in his humanness, but also we will be challenged by the story of the courageous faith of this woman and the boundary crossing that happens in this incident.

First of all, the humanness of Jesus -- this is something that is so important for us to continue to grow in our awareness of who Jesus really is, fully human and yet fully son of God, fully divine. But in his humanness, we can connect with him, and I think, especially if we now put this incident, again, within the context of the incidents that have been recorded and have been part of our gospel lesson over the last couple of weeks.

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isaiah 56:1, 6-7

Going back two or three Sundays ago, to the time when Jesus just heard from the disciples of John the Baptist that John, that friend of Jesus, even mentor of Jesus, had been executed by Herod, and you may remember that at that point, as Matthew tells us, "On hearing this, Jesus set out for a secluded place to be alone." He needed to grieve (he's human, like us) and to deal with this terrible tragedy, the evil of the execution of John.

But Jesus was prevented because he had headed for the secluded place, but the people heard of it and they followed him on foot. So then he spends that whole day in the desert, preaching and teaching, and then feeding that huge crowd, thousands of people. After that, once more Jesus tries to get away. He sends the disciples away by boat, and then he joins them, coming across the water, and when they get there, they discover that the local people had heard about his coming, so they gather again and he still doesn't get away for that time of grieving, trying to deal with the pain, the sorrow and the loss.

So he spends more time with the local people, teaching them and so on, but now once more, he's leaving, and this time he crosses the border into the Gentile territory. Maybe partly it's because he wants to consider his own situation. Herod has executed John and Herod has also begun to be concerned about Jesus, and now this woman confronts him. There are a couple things about the incident that we might not be aware of at first, but just the fact that a woman would publicly come up to Jesus and that he would even interact with her, would be breaking a barrier that was part of the culture and the religious understanding of the Jewish people at the time. Women did not speak to men in public -- women alone.

This is the first time where Jesus treats anybody so harshly. He ignores her, but don't you think it's maybe partly because he's still so distressed and he's frustrated? He's human. But then after the disciples urge him, "Send her away," she comes and kneels down right in front of him. Jesus points out to her what had been his understanding. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus has twice made it clear that his mission is to the sons and daughters of Israel. He doesn't understand his mission is going beyond coming into the midst of his own people and bringing about a reform of the Jewish religion. His mission is limited to the house of Israel -- that's his understanding.

But then when the woman challenges him and he speaks so harshly to her, "It's not right to give the food of the

children to the dogs,? it's insulting, but the woman puts him off very cleverly, in a way, by, in a sense, turning his words against him, ?But even the dogs get the crumbs from the table.? Jesus is astounded, so then he says to her, ?Woman, how great is your faith,? and he heals her daughter.

The challenge here, I think, first of all, is for us to understand more deeply this profound mystery of Jesus being fully human, like us. He can be frustrated. He has to continue to learn what his mission is, and he can even learn from a person who would be considered an outsider, from a woman. As we begin to reflect upon this, we realize that the challenge for us is also to understand that we too have to keep on discovering what is the will of God for us, the community of disciples of Jesus. We can be too set in our ways. We can think things have been determined forever, but maybe not.

Jesus thought his mission was only to the lost children of the house of Israel; now he learns no. It says Isaiah proclaims in the first lesson today, when Isaiah pictures the chosen people coming back from exile, but the foreigners coming with them, and God says to the foreigners who join and serve God, loving God's name, ?I will bring them to my holy mountain, give them joy in my house of prayer. I will accept on my altar their burnt offerings and sacrifices, for my house will be called a house of prayer for all the nations.? Those words of Isaiah now become clearly true for Jesus, and he understands his mission goes beyond the mission to his own people -- it's too all the nations.

Can we learn in the same way? Are there not issues today that confront us that never confronted Jesus, and that maybe we've got ourselves too set in our ways and we're not ready to be open to God's new calling to us, new ways of reaching out, new ways of ministering, calling into our ministry people we've never thought of calling before; recognizing, rather, I should say, the call that is given? We're short of priests. Could not God be speaking to us, urging us, we must expand our understanding of who is called?

That's certainly a challenge for our church, but it's a challenge that we must face. But then also as we continue to learn about Jesus and how he grew in understanding and in a way, was converted by this woman, as we begin to allow ourselves to be open to conversion, we also find ourselves challenged in another way. It became very clear to me on the week before this gospel lesson, this past week. I was participating in a memorial for Franz Jagerstatter, a peasant from Austria, who refused to serve in Hitler's armies.

The anniversary of his death was August 9th, and in the tiny village in Austria where he lived and where he refused the service in Hitler's armies, every year on the date of his execution, there is a peace march, and I was privileged this year to be part of it. But it was a striking thing for me when I looked at the feast for that day, now on August 9th. The feast is the Feast of Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, someone who most of us probably would not be aware of. By her other name, we might: Edith Stein, a faithful Jewish woman who did become Christian, but was still a Jew and was executed in Auschwitz because of her Jewishness.

Here is the terrible evil of our exclusion. This happened within a nation that was Christian, and what Franz Jagerstatter was resisting was that ideology of Hitler and of the Nazi tyranny, which brought about the holocaust of over six million Jews. We must break down these barriers. We must be open to people of other faith, traditions; welcome the Jewish people as Jews; Muslims as Muslims. All of us are sons and daughters of the same God, brothers and sisters in the same human family. The challenge that Jesus struggled with to move beyond the boundaries that he at first understood were boundaries for him -- that's the challenge for us, to move beyond these boundaries, to welcome all people as sons and daughters of God.

We say this in our Eucharistic Prayer, and I hope you listen especially carefully today, ?Yes, God, you are holy. For this we thank you. We thank you, above all, for your son Jesus. You sent him into this world because people had turned away from you and no longer loved one another. Jesus opened our eyes and our hearts to understand that we are brothers and sisters, and that you are the one God of us all. And Jesus brought us the good news of life to be lived with you forever in heaven. He showed us the way to that life, the way of love. He's gone that

way before us.?

That is the prayer that we proclaim as we renew the life, death and resurrection of Jesus in our Eucharistic Liturgy this morning. We must listen to those words carefully, carry them out. God is the God of all. All of us are brothers and sisters in the human family. The challenge is real, but it's a challenge that we must confront. We can turn to Jesus in a very special way today and ask him to help us to be open to being converted, as he was open; ask him to help us to break down those barriers; ask him to help us to continue to bring all the religions together and understand that we worship the one God who is the God of all.

As we do that, there is a real hope that peace can come into our world, a peace that is brought about because all members of the human family recognize that our God is the God of all, with the hope and the prayer that we can respond to the challenge this morning, we now continue our Liturgy and listen carefully to the Eucharistic Prayer as it is proclaimed today.

[Homily given at St. Leo Parish, Detroit, Mich.]

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