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Ten commandments light the way to covenant with God

Thomas Gumbleton | Mar. 19, 2012 The Peace Pulpit

Editor's note: Because Bishop Thomas Gumbleton was traveling last week, his homily for March 11 was late coming to NCR.

Sometimes when we celebrate the special Peace Mass, if you will, on occasion when we've been reflecting on the way that Jesus teaches us to bring peace into our hearts, lives and worlds, we want to choose certain lessons that we think might express that. Well, these are the lessons that were already assigned for this Sunday, and it's been my experience very often that if you go to the lesson of the day, you find lessons that God wants you to hear rather than you choosing certain lessons that you think God wants you to hear.
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They are lessons that you pick out. This is God's word, speaking to us, I think, in a very marvelous and powerful way, about what we have to do as followers, what we have to be as followers of Jesus. Last Sunday, you may remember, we had that difficult lesson from the Book of Genesis, where we heard how God somehow had asked Abraham to sacrifice his own son, Isaac. Probably as most people would, you struggled with that lesson last Sunday, and it is difficult of a God who would ask a father to torture and kill his own son.

Third Sunday of Lent

Exodus 20:1-17

Psalms 19:8, 9, 10, 11

1 Corinthians 1:22-25

John 2:13-25

Full text of the readings

That can't be true of God. So as you struggled to find some way to interpret it, one thing is that it could well have been a way of God teaching the people to reject infant sacrifice, which was common among the people where they were living. I also discovered last week that in the Jewish tradition, they don't talk about it as the sacrifice of Isaac, where Abraham was sacrificing his son. They talk about it as the binding of Isaac to God, entering into the covenant with God where he was bound to God and committed to follow the ways of God, and God would be bound to him.

Our first lesson today seems in a way to pick up on that, because these are the responsibilities that we begin to have as we're bound to God in a deep covenant relationship. God is our God. We are God's people and we're bound together. God has responsibilities to us, which God undertakes, to love us with unconditional love, an everlasting love, and we have the responsibility to follow the ways of God.

They're spelled out here in this first lesson today in a way that's very familiar to us: the commandments that we've come to learn, that have come to us out of the Jewish part of our tradition. Again, we discover, as we enter into our new covenant with God, through Jesus, that we go beyond those responsibilities spelled out in the Book of Exodus. Jesus came, as He said Himself, not to destroy the law, though that's all part of the covenant, but to fulfill it, to go beyond it.

That's what we find is being spelled out for us in the other two lessons: How we go beyond what was the responsibilities entailed in becoming part of the first covenant. This new covenant takes us beyond the responsibilities. The first thing that we notice in the Gospel is how Jesus makes himself the centerpiece of God's binding God to us and us to God.

He points out to the Jewish leaders who challenge him because He has driven out the money changers and knocked over the tables of those who are buying and selling, telling them you can't make the house of God a marketplace, especially where you would be cheating and defrauding the poor. Jesus makes Himself, when they challenge Him, "What authority do you have to be doing this?" He says, "Destroy this temple."

They thought He meant the building that was standing before them, but we understand because the Gospel writer points this out, He was talking about the temple of His body. "I am the living presence of God. Destroy me and I will rise again." So Jesus gives us Himself as the rule, the responsibilities we have to enter into this new covenant. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. We have to listen to His words. We have to watch how we act and find what our responsibilities are.

Clearly among them is this responsibility to give up violence, to only respond to hatred and violence with love, with forgiveness. We know that if we listen to our second lesson today, that this is a primary part of the teaching of Jesus. In Paul's writing to the church of Corinth, as I mentioned in introducing that lesson, he says before the part we hear read today, "I was sent not to baptize, just to carry out sacraments, but to proclaim the good news. That's why I was sent among you, to proclaim the good news, and it's a message that can't be proclaimed in human words or human terms."

Paul says, "Here am I preaching a crucified Christ. What can be more foolish than that -- a crucified Christ, someone who gives Himself over to His enemies, refuses to use violence against them, allows Himself to be tortured and put to death. That's what I have to preach." He goes on to say to the chosen people, it seems, a scandal, a God who would allow God to be humiliated, tortured, executed. That's God? That's a stumbling block for many that can't accept that kind of God.

To the Greeks, the so-called wise people, it's utter foolishness to give yourself over to your enemy and not to use violence and resistance, not to fight back and try to destroy your enemy but rather, love your enemy. What could be more foolish? So people have a very difficult time accepting this Jesus who says, "Destroy this temple. Destroy Me and in three days, I will rise again because I am the way, the truth and the life. I am the son of God in human form, so you must learn to follow Me."

That is clearly the message that we are being given today, and it is a message that is difficult to accept, to draw into ourselves and to commit ourselves to follow. Like the people in Corinth, we might feel this is scandalous. It's a stumbling block. We can't get beyond the idea that God would become one like us in every way, and then give himself over to death, even death on a cross. We might be like those for whom it's not just a stumbling block. It's sheer foolishness.

What could be more foolish than to give up violence and power and wealth that seems to give you power? What could be more foolish? As Paul says at the end of that passage, "The weakness of God is stronger than human strength, and the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom." Somehow, we have to try to really take that in and realize that God's weakness, Jesus hanging on a cross, Christ crucified, that is a greater power than any human power. It's the power of love.

Jesus proclaimed earlier in His life, "I, when I am lifted up"-- and he meant on the cross -- "I will draw all people to myself. Love overpowers hatred and evil. Love is the greatest power there is and I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself." So the weakness of God is stronger than human strength or human power.

This weakness of God, loving without limit, without condition, that's the greatest power there is. We have to come to accept that and integrate it into our thinking and way of life.

It's also foolishness in the eyes of people who don't accept Jesus. It's total foolishness, but this foolishness of God is wiser than any human wisdom. The foolishness of God, if we would accept it and follow it, this way of love would be the way that our world would be transformed, and gradually our world would become the full Reign of God as we move according to the way of Jesus. We will transform our world into as close an image of the reign of God as possible.

One final thing I thought I might suggest for us, as we try to absorb this teaching, this foolishness of God, this weakness of God, and understand its ultimate wisdom and power is to do what is suggested for us in the letter to the Hebrews. There is a part in that letter in the 12th chapter where the author talks about the cloud of witnesses. It's a beautiful passage. In fact, before we get to the 12th chapter, in the whole 11th chapter, the author goes through the history of the chosen people, and cites one person after another who has been faithful to God, some of whom have been taken up into heaven like Elijah and the other prophets.

There is this whole history of these tremendous witnesses. Then in the 12th chapter, he says, "With so many witnesses in a great cloud on every side of us we, too, then should throw off everything that hinders us and keep moving steadily in the race we have started. Let us not lose sight of Jesus, who leads us in our faith and brings it to fulfillment." So we, too, should look to the cloud of witnesses, those listed here from our Hebrew tradition, but also the cloud of witnesses who are around us today.

We can think of those witnesses, and I can tell you many examples and spell out in detail what they were, but I'll mention some names. Think of people like Oscar Romero. Is he not a witness of living according to the way of Jesus and giving his life, or others in El Salvador, the six Jesuits and two women killed with them? Are they not witnesses to us of accepting this truth, living it and even dying for it, but being raised up?

In our own country, I think of living witnesses, people like Daniel Berrigan and Phillip Berrigan, those who show us the way to reject the power and violence of the world. Think of witnesses in other places, Franz Jägerstätter, who is so honored in this parish of St. Malachy, who was a witness rejecting the violence of war, refusing to serve in Hitler's army and being executed, but now being venerated by us as a witness to the way of Jesus. These witnesses are all around us, some well known, but many others in our midst if we just look around.

We should try to really cherish that cloud of witnesses because they're the ones, even all of us here together, who strengthen one another's faith and allow all of us to accept and to live out the message of Christ crucified, the message that seems so foolish but is ultimately totally wise, so weak but finally so powerful. With that cloud of witnesses as our support, our own support from one another, perhaps we will be more faithful in following the way of Jesus, the way of peace, forgiveness and love. They alone are the way of Christ and the way we must follow.

[Homily given at St. Malachy Church, Philadelphia, Penn. Given as part of a Catholic Peace Fellowship Retreat. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. **Sign up here** [2] to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

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