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To find Jesus, disciples must walk with the vulnerable

Thomas Gumbleton | Sep. 27, 2012 The Peace Pulpit

Once again, we have lessons that are intended to help us understand how to be a disciple of Jesus -- what it means to follow Jesus. To put this in context, it's good to remember from the last couple of Sundays what our scriptures have been teaching us. Last Sunday, you may remember, the first lesson was from the book of the prophet Isaiah. The prophet proclaims, "God has taught me, so I speak as God's disciple. I know how to sustain the weary. Morning after morning, God wakes me up to hear, to listen like a disciple."

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We try to listen to God's words and try to understand what it means to be a disciple, a follower of Jesus, and then of course, commit ourselves (if we choose to be a disciple), to follow his way. A couple of Sundays ago Jesus in the Gospel in instructing his disciples wanted them to understand that he had come not simply to heal this person or that person, but to transform our world. He had the mission to proclaim the good news: The reign of God is at hand. It's here for us to enter.

Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Wisdom 2:12, 17-20
Psalms 54: 3-4, 5, 6, 8
James 3:16-4:3
Mark 9:30-37
Full text of the readings [1]

That Sunday, we also listened to Isaiah giving us a beautiful description of what the reign of God is like, the fullness of life that comes. Let the wilderness and the arid land rejoice, the desert be glad and blossom. Covered with flowers, it sings. The desert sings and shouts with joy adorned with the splendor of Lebanon. My people see the glory of God, the majesty of our God. The prophet proclaims, "Give vigor to weary hands, strength to enfeebled knees. Say to those who are afraid, have courage, do not fear. See, your God comes bringing justice. And there will be fullness of life for every person. Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf unsealed. The lame will leap as a hart, and the tongue of the mute sing and shout."

No one will be anything but sharing in a completion of his or her humanness as God brings us to a fullness of life. The ransomed of God will return with everlasting joy upon their heads. They will come to Zion singing. Gladness and joy marching with them while sorrow and sighing flee away. This, of course, was Isaiah proclaiming the return of the exiles, but also a symbol -- a description of what God is intending for all of creation -- for every one of us, for every human being: a fullness of life, peace and joy. It's a beautiful call that Jesus says is his and that he calls us as disciples to fulfill, to proclaim this reign of God and to share with Jesus in bringing about the fullness of God's reign.

Last Sunday, too, we learned as a disciple that if you want to be my disciple, deny your very self. Take up your cross and follow me. Jesus told his disciples how he himself would be put to death, but he was going to show us, and he teaches us that a response to violence, a response to hatred is love -- choosing to suffer rather than to suffer, to be killed rather than to kill. The disciples couldn't accept this. Peter, especially, said, "No, no." But Jesus said, "Get behind me, you Satan. You are listening to human words, not to God's word."

We have that very radical call of Jesus to be disciples who love, transform our world through love and especially not just those who love us, but to love our enemies. Clearly, it's a challenge to be a disciple of Jesus. Today, once more, Jesus is teaching us how to be a disciple. This, too, is a very challenging Gospel. It might not strike us as though at first, but we hear how the disciples themselves heard Jesus talk about what it means to be a disciple.

What's happening as they walk along; they're arguing among themselves about who is to be the greatest. They seem not to have heard anything Jesus has said. When they get to their destination, the house in Capernaum, where they were to stay, Jesus said, "What were you talking about on the way?" They did not answer because as Mark tells us, they had been arguing about who was the greatest.

Then Jesus does this symbolic action. He calls all the disciples together. He sits down, takes a little child, and places the child in their midst, in the center of the whole group. Putting his arms around the child, Jesus said to the disciples, "Whoever welcomes a child such as this in my name welcomes me. Whoever welcomes me welcomes not me, but the one who sent me." Now this might not strike us at first as being so challenging, but if you look into the scripture commentators on this passage, you'll discover that child is a very powerful symbol for the disciples.

One scripture scholar, Fr. John Donahue, puts it this way: "To understand the power of Jesus' prophetic and symbolic action, we should not think of children simply as loving and innocent. A little child can be so charming and attractive, but not to think about them in just that way. At the time of Jesus, children were non-persons, without any power, often unprotected. They function as symbols of powerlessness and vulnerability. Contrary to the disciples' desire for positions of power in the reign of God, Jesus says they must be much more concerned with welcoming into their midst the poor and the vulnerable and by so doing receive both Jesus and God who sent Jesus."

In other words, if they want to find Jesus, they have to go among the vulnerable, the weak, the oppressed and the poor, those who so often are treated almost as non-persons. That's where you'll find Jesus. That's where you'll carry on the work of Jesus by being with the most vulnerable and being sure to see that they are cared for; embracing them, having compassion for them. Right now, we're living in a society where there are more and more people becoming poor.

As Oscar Romero said about his country, El Salvador, many years ago but we could say now about our country, about the situation among the world's nations: "So few have so much, so many have so little." That's not right. That's not the reign of God. A disciple is called to enter into the work of Jesus of making the reign of God happen. Of course, it's true right in our own midst. This past week, the newspaper published a very extraordinary article [2]: "Kids suffer hard times, child poverty on the rise."

This is the article: "Despite claims in the past year that Michigan had bottomed out of the recession, new data released today by the U.S. Census Bureau show there is much work to be done as incomes continue to fall and poverty rates climb -- particularly child poverty rates."

The incomes continue to fall. More and more people continue to be out of work, or many people continue to be out of work. Wages are low. People can be working full-time and still be living in poverty.

The number of children that are living in poverty goes up. From 2010 to 2011, the statewide median household income fell by 1.5 percent. The percentage of people living in poverty jumped to 17.5 percent. Several communities have seen significant increases in child poverty rates. In many of the areas of our state, people are becoming poorer. Children are going into poverty. Of course, with falling incomes and rising poverty figures, the other kind of social problems continue to increase.

We're faced with a situation where what Jesus was describing is happening. Isn't it our call as a disciple to do what Jesus did, to be with the poor, with those who are vulnerable, those who are being treated unjustly because they do not receive a just wage? We should embrace them, but even more, besides showing compassion, besides reaching out to provide immediate help, we must try to change the situation. We have to try and make the reign of God happen where everyone shares, in a complete way, in what God has given to all and not just to a few so that everyone has an opportunity for a full human life.

Our call to be disciples is very demanding. Certainly, a disciple of Jesus will not reject the poor, be harsh to the poor, or consider them people we don't have to care about. No, if you even want to be with Jesus, you must be among the poor. You must be sharing in the difficulties of the poor, being compassionate and working to change the situation to make the reign of God happen. That's our call as disciples. Each of us has to try to determine now what will be our attitude toward the poor.

What will be our attitude toward especially children? More and more are becoming poor at a regular basis. What will be our attitude? What will we do to try to change things with not only immediate help, but also even trying to change the structures of our society, the economic structures, so that we begin to have the kind of society that Isaiah described, as I read before, from the 35th chapter of the book of Isaiah. It tells of building a world where there is a fullness of life for every person -- all of creation coming into its fullness, every human person being able to achieve the fullness of their humanness that God intends for each of us.

We have to be working to make that happen. Our call to be a disciple of Jesus is a very demanding call. We must commit ourselves if we want to follow Jesus, to do what he calls us to do. If we do that, our second lesson today from the letter of James shows us what can happen. Wherever there was jealousy and ambition -- people ascribing to be the greatest -- you will also find discord and all that is evil. Instead, here's what happens when we try to be disciples and follow the way of Jesus: We experience the wisdom that comes from above, a wisdom that is pure and peace loving.

In this reign of God, if we make it happen, persons with this wisdom show understanding and listen to advice. They are full of compassion and good works. They are impartial and sincere. Impartial -- trying to make sure everyone has a full chance for a human life. In this reign of God, when we follow Jesus and become his disciples, we become peacemakers who sow peace and reap a harvest of justice. We share with Jesus in making the reign of God happen.

[Homily given at St. Mary Parish, Alpena, Mich. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. **Sign up here** [3] to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

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