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Everything we have is a gift from God, and all belongs to him

Thomas Gumbleton | Oct. 18, 2012 The Peace Pulpit

To begin our reflection on the lessons today, I think it's important to start with the very first lesson. But in order to understand fully these words from the Book of Wisdom, a book attributed to Solomon, the one among the ancient Jews who was especially noted for his wisdom, we must know that these words were written when many of the chosen people had left their homeland and had emigrated to Egypt, to Alexandria.

In Alexandria, there were very high-level schools where people claimed to have extraordinary access to wisdom. It was the Greek philosophers whom they studied and whom they thought of as truly wise. They were beginning to lose touch with their own covenant and the words of God revealed through the centuries. At this point, Solomon gives us the words that we heard in our first lesson, where he is trying to impress upon us that God's wisdom far surpasses any human wisdom.

No matter how deep it seems to be or how great it seems to be, how admired it is, God's wisdom goes far beyond human wisdom. Solomon says, "I prayed and understanding was given to me. I asked earnestly, and the spirit of wisdom came to me." Now he shows how important that is. "I prefer wisdom to scepters and thrones. I consider wealth as nothing compared with wisdom. I prefer wisdom to any jewel of unlimited value, since gold beside wisdom is nothing but a few grains of sand, and silver is nothing but mud. I loved her more than health. I even preferred her to light and beauty because radiance and wisdom, God's wisdom, never dies."

Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Wisdom 7:7-11
Psalms 90:12-13, 14-15, 16-17
Hebrews 4:12-13
Mark 10:17-30

Full text of the readings

Solomon was trying to impress upon his own people at the time, and upon us today, that we have to search out God's wisdom. Where will we find it? We find it ultimately in God's word. There is a marvelous in the passage in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah where the prophet is speaking about God's word. He says, "As the rain and the snow come down from the heavens and do not return until they have watered the earth, making it yield seed for the sower and food for others to eat, so is my word that goes out of my mouth."

"It will not return from me idle, but it shall accomplish my will, the purpose for which it has been sent." Then we have to listen to this caution that Isaiah gives us. Isaiah says God's word comes down into our awareness, into our world, into our consciousness, just as rain comes down from heaven and earth, and is planted there to grow into marvelous fruit. Isaiah, also speaking for God, says, "My thoughts are not your thoughts. My ways are not your ways," says God, "for as the heavens are above the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts higher than your thoughts."

Isaiah is warning us that this word of God, the wisdom of God, is going to be far different from human wisdom or anything that we will find in the world around us. If we listen to the second lesson today, we notice how this word of God is like a two-edged sword that enters deeply into our consciousness and that it challenges us to change our ways, to follow the wisdom of God. The passage says, "It pierces to the division of soul and spirit, the intentions and thoughts of the heart."

Everything is uncovered by this word of God and laid bare to the eyes of anyone who listens. So the word of God, this wisdom of God, is going to challenge us. The Gospel lesson today provides probably the most difficult challenges that we face when we try to listen to God's word, follow it and really be a disciple of Jesus

because the challenge is about material goods, wealth. There is a passage in St. Luke where Jesus says to his disciples, "Beware of greed in every form."

That's the first danger of wealth. We always want more. What is enough? If you are part of the culture in which we are in the country -- we're all part of it -- we're constantly being bombarded with messages. You have to have more. You have to have something better. Every time you buy something, you'll always be expected to buy the next version of it that is supposed to be a better version. So we pile up material goods.

That's the dilemma that the young man has who comes to Jesus. He's got a load of wealth. He says to Jesus, "What do I have to do for eternal life?" Jesus says, "Keep the commandments." He says, "I've done all that." "Then, if you want to really follow me, sell everything you have, give it to the poor and follow me." Does Jesus really expect every one of us to give up everything we have, sell it, give it to the poor and follow him? I don't think so.

He is inviting special ones, certain ones. This young man, Jesus looked on him with love. Mark tells us he looked steadily at him, and he loved him. He wanted him to be one of those special disciples who would become followers of Jesus and be going everywhere to preach the word. Of course, not everyone is expected to give up everything and become an itinerant preacher as Jesus was. Look in the Gospels. Martha, Mary and Lazarus, they were very close friends of Jesus.

When Lazarus died, remember Jesus cried because he had lost a very deep, close friend, and yet, Martha, Mary and Lazarus lived in their home. They didn't give up everything and go with Jesus, walking throughout Galilee, Judea and so on. There is a special way, and over the centuries, probably among many others, this month we celebrated the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi. Francis was one who heard that call, who radically followed Jesus.

So he went and did give up everything. He had others who followed him. Maybe one of the most famous was the other person from Assisi, Clare, who started the community of what we call Poor Clares. They were those who were especially chosen by Jesus to do that, to give up everything; but the rest of us, how do we deal with the problem of wealth? I think the first thing that we have to understand is something that the young man in the Gospel did not understand.

He talked with Jesus about, How do I earn the privilege of entering into the Kingdom of God? How do I earn it? The first thing we have to understand is we don't earn everlasting life. We don't earn the glories, the joys and the fullness of life that's in the Reign of God. That's always a gift to us, and we have to take it beyond that. Everything that we have is a gift. We must have that attitude, that God has blessed us. Our life, we could not be here for a second unless God sustained us at every moment.

None of us earned our life, None of us continues to earn our lives. It's all a gift from God. All of creation is a gift of God. None of us can earn that, and if we think we've earned it, you've made a mistake. We underestimate what God has given us. The world itself, and all the blessings that are on our earth: God gave that to us. We never made it or earned it, and our individual lives are a gift. Our abilities and everything we have is a gift from God.

We have to have that attitude that I don't own what God has given to me. It's God's gift. I haven't earned it. I can't earn it. It's a gift from God. So when it comes to our material goods, how do we avoid greed? I think it starts with that attitude that all that I have doesn't really belong to me. It belongs to God, and because it belongs to God, it belongs to everyone. In 1967, Pope Paul VI published an encyclical letter in which he spoke about wealth and poverty.

He gives us the principle that we must follow if we're going to avoid greed in every form, and we're going to find our way into the fullness of God's life and the Reign of God. Paul writes, "The recent Council" -- he's

talking about Vatican II, which ended in 1965, and this is 1967 -- "reminded us God intended the earth and all that it contains for the use of every human person and every people." You have to listen to that carefully.

"God intended the earth and all that it contains, everything -- God intended it for the use of every human person." What God wants is for every one of us and every person on this earth to have the opportunity for a full, human life, and that's why God gave us the earth and all that it contains, so that we could have a full human life. What has happened? We live in a country where we've had protests because there is 1 percent who have an extraordinary, unbelievable amount of wealth, and 99 percent that are struggling.

That's not right. God intended the world and all that it contains for every person, so every person would have a full, human life. In our country, we have almost 15 percent of our children living in poverty. They don't have access to what we need for a full, human life: access to health care, education and enough food every day. That's wrong, obviously, because others have more than they need. That's why Paul goes on to say, "All other rights besides the right to private property are to be subordinated to this principle."

He quotes then from the Letter of St. John. "If someone who has the riches of this world sees a brother or sister in need and closes your heart to that one, how does the love of God abide in that one?" Then he goes on to quote the early teachings of the church in order to describe the proper attitude of people who would possess anything towards persons in need. He quotes St. Ambrose: "You are not making a gift of your possessions to the poor person. You are handing over to the poor what belongs to the poor."

That's a hard saying, but it's part of God's wisdom. If you have more than you need and there is someone who is lacking the very necessities of human life, it's not really yours any longer. It belongs to the poor person. That's what Ambrose says. You are not making a gift of your possessions to the poor because you have more than you need. So it belongs to the poor who do not have enough. Then Paul gives a final conclusion that is a very difficult principle, but one that flows right out of God's word and the wisdom of God.

"No one has the right to keep anything that is beyond your need when others lack the barest necessities." So we want to penetrate the wisdom of God this morning and understand how we are going to deal with material goods in the world that God has given for all. If we really want to understand how to enter into the Reign of God, we have to understand this very basic principle. No one has the right to keep what is beyond your need when others lack the barest necessities.

We have to begin to examine what we have that is in excess. Every one of us has the right to a full human life, so we don't go and sell everything, but we have to make sure that we avoid greed in every form, and that we are willing to share so that everyone on this planet will have the opportunity for a full human life. Each of us has to begin to look into our own way of life, our own attitudes towards material goods. Each of us has to consider, "Do I have more than I need for a full human life?"

If so, it belongs to those who do not have enough. Do we have to change our lifestyle? Perhaps. We may have to change some policies in our country that cause so many to be poor, while few become more and more rich. This is the wisdom of God. It is like a two-edged sword that goes deeply into our being and challenges us, and the word of God, the wisdom of God, will be a judge of us.

If we follow this wisdom of God, we may not fear, for we will have full human life and we will also be invited by God to everlasting life. The Reign of God will be ours if we follow the wisdom, the word of God, avoid greed in every form, share what we have and change our ways of life so that everyone has a chance to share in what God has given to all, and not to a few.

[Homily given at St. Anne, Detroit. 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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