NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Sept. 17, 2006 Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Sep. 21, 2006 The Peace Pulpit

Many times, you've heard me refer to our community as a community of disciples. This is what the whole church is, a community of disciples of Jesus. If that's the case, then of course, it's very important to understand what it means to be a disciple. As I mentioned in introducing the first lesson, Isaiah makes it very clear that the first thing about being a disciple is to be one who listens, listens deeply to God's word. "God has taught me, so I speak as God's disciple. Morning after morning God wakes me up to hear, to listen, like a disciple. God has opened my ear."

Disciple. The word itself means a learner, someone who's learning. We learn to be the disciples of Jesus by listening deeply to God and letting that word of God form us, change us, guide us, lead us.

It's very important when we listen to the word of God to be ready for surprises. We can't come with pre-conceived ideas, we have to be open. Because as Isaiah says a little bit further on, in Chapter 55:

> *Seek God, while God may be found. Let the wicked abandon their ways, let them forsake their thoughts. Let them turn to God, for 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 above your thoughts.*

If we're really open to God and to God's word, he will enter our lives, and sometimes it'll be a message that perhaps we weren't quite ready for or did not anticipate, because we were not thinking according to God's ways and God's thoughts.

I had a very sad, but also beautiful experience this past week where it seems someone did listen deeply to God's word and at first thought God's word would be one way and it turned out to be so different.

This week I received a long e-mail from Laura Collins. Some of you will remember Laura. She worked here as a Mercy volunteer for a whole year after she graduated from Catholic University. She lives in Philadelphia with her family, and she has been gone from here for a couple of years, but her father has been very ill with cancer. He just celebrated his 53rd birthday a couple of weeks ago. He's had cancer for a number of years, he had a brain tumor. He underwent some very extensive surgery. It seemed like he had overcome the cancer. The tumor was gone. They had been praying hard for that. It seemed like a miracle. Well, a couple years later, he developed cancer in his organs, in his stomach, liver, pancreas. And again, of course they prayed. They prayed hard. But they could not do any surgery. They tried; they opened him up and they found they couldn't operate, so they sewed him up again. We've heard of situations like that.

But then he began to undergo some alternative, experimental therapy. When they did a CAT scan, it looked like the tumors were gone. They rejoiced. Then they did a second one, and the first report was wrong. So he still had

cancer extending through his whole body very rapidly. But here's where, in an extraordinary way, Laura, her father and her family have really been listening to God. She says in an e-mail:

> *We received word on Thursday?.that this time, the Melanoma (the cancer) appears to have won. The tumors have "exploded" and are larger than last week and now appear to be in his bones. Our oncologist met with us Friday night at the hospital. He stood by my dad's bed as the four of us held hands. He stammered as best he could through language about what one does when the goal is no longer to be a cure. He was recommending hospice care.*
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> He said, "What do you think about that Rich?" My dad, reflective as ever, scratched his head, closed his eyes, and then looked up and said, "We've done everything we could have ever done. I guess this is my time. We did our best."
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> So, as we sat around together, as a family that night, we asked my dad what he thought, what he felt, what he wanted. We all agreed with him that it was time to take the hospice journey -- which is so ironical and fitting in all ways.
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> I am only thankful that a national for-profit company bought up my mom's non-profit, mission-oriented hospice program causing her to leave her 12 year ministry as a Hospice nurse only months ago, freeing her to take this journey as a wife, a lover, a mother, a friend and a partner rather than as a professional. It seems like things always have some reason when you have your listening attuned to God.
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> And so my dad told us simply, that he would like to have a party. He wants to celebrate his life with all of his loved ones and all of those who have held him in prayer and hope. He doesn't want to dwell on the sadness of death. He wants to remind us and himself of all the life worth celebrating. "I've lived a good life," were his words. And this is truer than anything else I know. The party will be this coming weekend. I'll be sending invitations. If you are free and in the area or want to make a trip here, please stop. My dad loves people, loves visitors, and wants to feel surrounded by light and love."

Isn't that an experience of all of us? We would pray for a cure, for a miracle. We would want to have that happen. Sometimes, as in this case, if we would listen, God is speaking to us in a way that we at first do not want to hear. But God's ways are not our ways. God's thoughts are not our thoughts. So we listen deeply, and then with faith, with confidence, with joy, with love, we accept God's word and let it guide us. This is what it means to be a disciple. I think that's a very beautiful example of listening deeply to God's word and letting it shape us through life.

But now there's another thing that I think is very important when we listen to God's word and open ourselves to being formed as Jesus' disciples through that word. I'm sure we've all had the experience, apart from listening to God's word, listening to other people. And all of us at times are selective listeners. We hear what we want to hear. We don't hear the whole message. Well that's something that's very dangerous when you're trying to listen to God's word. That's exactly what happened to Peter.

Peter, as you heard in the gospel, was rebuked pretty harshly by Jesus, "Get behind me you Satan!" You see, Peter had listened selectively. He had heard Jesus talk about the reign of God is at hand. The reign of God is ready to happen. Peter listening with his selectivity, heard that to mean, the kingdom of Israel is going to be restored! Jesus is here as the Messiah who will overthrow the occupation of the Romans! Who will become a great religious, military, political leader, make our nation great again! He failed to hear what Jesus had said after he proclaimed the reign of God is at hand: "Change your lives!" See, the reign of God isn't what you think it is!

You have to listen deeply to God's word to discover what the reign of God really is. Peter had ignored that part, and so he did not really listen deeply to God's word.

In an example that's very timely, I think, and I say this with some hesitation because I'm going to talk about Pope Benedict. I think that's the problem that happened this week. He listened selectively to God's word, and when he proclaimed the message that he proclaimed this week -- what he said that would cause so much trouble, he discussed the Islamic concept of jihad, which he defined as "holy war," and he said that "violence in the name of religion is contrary to God's nature and to reason." And that's true, of course. Violence, killing, war goes against the whole understanding of God as love, and Benedict has heard that through the scriptures. It's so plain in the gospel message of Jesus. You can't miss if you listened at all.

But there's another short passage that Jesus proclaimed, that it seems to me if Pope Benedict had been thinking about this, he would have been much more careful in what he said.

Remember the part when Jesus is talking to the people who are correcting other people. He challenged them, "Look, you can see the speck in somebody else's eye, but you can't see the beam in your own eye!" If you look at others but don't look at yourself. Pope Benedict in speaking about Islam -- yes, at times, there has been those who have used it in a violent way, who spread their message through war, through killing. But you don't have to look very far into the history of the Christian religion to discover that we've done the same thing many, many times.

The whole so-called conquest of the Americas was a violent spreading of the faith. Latin America especially. It was so terrible there that back in the 16th century the bishop who founded the diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas in Mexico down around Chiapas, Bartolomé de las Casas, was condemned by the pope because he condemned those who were killing the natives. He said, "This is no way to spread the Christian faith." He was condemned and removed as a missionary from Mexico. Our history is filled with that kind of violence.

So somehow if we were listening to God's word, and again, I am not talking just about Pope Benedict, but all of us. If we listen to God's word, we'll let it form us and change us into a true disciple of Jesus.

If at times we can help others to hear God's word better, well of course we can do that. But we always start by looking into our own hearts, finding that beam in our own eye before we start to make judgments and make statements about others.

There are many ways in which we can now apply this to our own lives and each of us. I think it's important that when we commit ourselves to hearing God's word, we should expect to be surprised at times. The outcome won't always be what we think would be the best. God's ways are not our ways. But we must listen to God's word with total openness and to the whole message of Jesus. If we listen deeply we will become true disciples of Jesus. As that community of disciples of Jesus, we will be able to help in the work of Jesus to make the reign of God happen.

Source URL (retrieved on *05/05/2015 - 06:42*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/peace-pulpit/sept-17-2006-twenty-fourth-sunday-ordinary-time