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

Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Oct. 19, 2006 The Peace Pulpit

As I read through various commentaries this week on the scriptures, I came across this item: "Biographers of W.C. Fields", a stand up comedian many decades ago, "always narrate an episode which happened shortly before he died. A friend came to visit him in the hospital and was amazed to find the comedian reading a Bible. 'I didn't know you were a religious person, Bill,' the friend said. 'I'm not!' Fields shot back. 'Then what are you doing with that Bible?' 'Looking for loopholes.' "

I have a hunch that that might be our reactions as we listen to today's scriptures. We want to find some loophole.

The second lesson kind of alerts us when we're told how "the Word of God is living and effective. Sharper than any two-edged sword. It pierces to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and judges the intentions and thoughts of the heart." The Word of God is a powerful word. It can enter into us and if it does, it's like a two-edged sword -- it cuts both ways. If we don't listen, it cuts us away from God. If we listen, it means we have to cut away much from our own way of acting and being.

The Word of God is, in a sense, dangerous, because if we really listen, we're going to have to make dramatic changes in how we act, who we are and so on. And sometimes we're tempted to say, "If only I could find a loophole. I want to hear God's Word, but maybe not all of it" -- something like that.

When we go back to the first lesson today, we get kind of a hint of how difficult the Word of God can be when Solomon says, "I prayed and understanding was given to me, I asked earnestly and the Spirit of Wisdom came to me, and I preferred her to scepters and thrones. And I considered well as nothing compared with her." Wisdom. Knowing God and God's Word is more important than anything else. In a way that's threatening -- people look for a loophole.

Then when you come to the Gospel lesson that's where it becomes very tough and difficult for all of us, I think. Here's this man who comes to Jesus and he's obviously a very good person -- lived according to the commandments from his childhood. But that's not enough. Oh, it'll get you into heaven, but Jesus is offering something more. To enter the Reign of God right now requires us to change dramatically. The Reign of God, where God's goodness, God's love, God's wisdom prevails, where we follow God and God alone, where we discover the peace and joy that only God can give. It's the Reign of God that we can enter right now, and the Reign of God that Jesus is proclaiming that will transform the world. See, for that you need much more, and that's why Jesus tells the young man after he looks on him with love. Think of Jesus looking upon everyone of us this morning with love, steadily looking on me with love, and then saying, "OK, you really want to enter the Reign of God? Go sell everything. Give it all up, all your desires for the wealth and the power of the world. And

what's even more challenging -- follow me!" And where was he going? Remember? To Jerusalem, where he's going to be tortured, executed, murdered, and yet all the time showing us the way of love and how that will transform our world into the Reign of God. "Follow me."

Is it any wonder when you start to truly hear what God's Word says today that we start looking for loopholes? And yet, it is possible. You know, his disciples said, "How is anybody ever going to make it?" He said, "No, OK, not by yourself, you can't do it, but with God all things are possible." Yes, anyone of else can choose to enter the Reign of God, to live within that Reign right now, to help to transform our world into the Reign of God. And yet, we keep shying away from it.

This week I read in the paper about one more diocese that has entered into bankruptcy, because the diocese, not willingly, but is being forced to pay just compensation to many survivors of sexual abuse. When you first read that, I suppose, most of us would say, "Well, what a tragedy." And yet, what's so desperately sad about that? After all, the Church is supposed to be poor, isn't it? Can you imagine the community of disciples of Jesus having to declare bankruptcy? What would they be giving up? They weren't rich. Jesus wasn't rich. He gave up possessions. He lived poorly. For a few hundred years, the church had no property, had no buildings. There was a community of disciples following the way of Jesus.

In a sense, I think, instead of deploring the fact that a diocese goes bankrupt, every diocese ought to be giving its possessions away. We ought to be a church of the poor. We're not. We have extraordinary wealth. In fact, we're so far from being a church of the poor that if you look where the poor really are in the world, especially here in our country, the church is moving away. Oh, some people stay and continue to proclaim God's Word, but often it's not the Roman Catholic church. And that's very sad, very sad that our Church is really not willing to do what Jesus asks of us. "Go sell everything. Give it all up and then enter into the Reign of God, enter into the work of transforming God's world into the Reign of God." It could happen, but it isn't just, in a sense, the institutional church. Each of us also has to change.

In an encyclical letter which he wrote back in 1967, Pope Paul VI called upon all of us to look carefully at what we have and how much we have. He asked the question, quoting St. John's first letter, "How does the love of God abide in any person who has the goods of this world and closes his or her heart to someone in need?" The love of God does not abide in such a person.

Paul VI goes on to tell us, teaching out of the tradition of the church and out of the Scriptures that, "No one has the right to keep for your own use what is beyond your need when others lack the barest necessities." We don't have a right to keep for our use what is beyond our need when others lack the barest necessities. In a city where one out of five children is living in poverty, is there anyone of us who's here today that could say, "I don't have something in excess that I could share with the poor?" Every one of us has to face up to this. "Go and sell what you have, give it all up, give it to the poor and then come and follow me."

And this is the other part that's so difficult -- to really follow Jesus, especially in following that way of love. What's been a big part of the news this week? North Korea is developing nuclear weapons and of course, we're in a panic over it. We're all upset -- the people of the United States -- it's going to be a threat to us. But do you know what's wrong with that whole picture? Who has the most nuclear weapons in the world? Who has used those weapons? Of course, it's the United States. Are we giving up any of our weapons? No. Are we building new weapons? Yes. Are we determined to use them? Yes. Is that following the way of Jesus? Of course it's not!

This week there was published a report -- of course, President Bush said, "Oh, it's not credible," but it is -- that in Iraq since we invaded that nation three and a half years ago, 655,000 -- 655,000! -- excess deaths have happened. That means almost three-quarters of a million people have been killed because we determined that we knew how to bring democracy to this country. How absurd -- to invade a country, to cause chaos and suffering and killing on a scale that's almost impossible to comprehend. Is that following the way of Jesus? Of course not. His way is the way of love. Is it possible? Of course.

Look at the other example we have this week -- the Amish community -- now here's a community that is living poorly; they don't have huge churches and so on. They're following Jesus. And, when they suffered that terrible tragedy, do they want to get revenge? Do they try to use violence to get even? No. When the killer is buried, there are about 75 people there -- over half of them are from the Amish community, following the way of love. It's possible, but it's certainly a challenge, isn't it?

Again, think of Jesus looking upon any one of us with love, tremendous love, and saying, "Go sell what you have, give it away, come follow me." And instead of being like the man in the Gospel going away sad, beg God to help us because it's only possible with God. Beg God to help us, to begin to rid ourselves of our excess wealth and truly to follow Jesus and his way of love.

Source URL (retrieved on *09/23/2014 - 03:59*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/peace-pulpit/twenty-eighth-sunday-ordinary-time