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Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Oct. 26, 2006 The Peace Pulpit

For six Sundays now, we have been traveling together with Jesus and the disciples as they make this journey to Jerusalem, and Jesus has been instructing them on what it means to be a disciple and so of course that instruction is for us. We are the community of the disciples of Jesus. That's what the church is; that's what our parish is -- a community of disciples.

But today we hear what is maybe the most difficult of the changes we have to undergo if we're going to be authentic, genuine disciples of Jesus. We have to give up power. And in the world in which we live power is important, so we have to be kind of against the culture. Jesus told those disciples, "Look, yes, among all the Gentile nations, among the pagans, those who are in authority, who are rulers, are tyrants. They oppress the others. That's what happens. Nations want to be the most powerful." "But among you," Jesus says, "it can't be that way. It cannot be that way. The community of disciples cannot be into power. Whoever is going to be a leader must be the servant of all." Jesus goes even further, "If you're going to be a leader, you must be the slave of all."

It seems totally contradictory, doesn't it? To put those two things together -- leadership and being a slave. But you see, for Jesus, leadership isn't imposing your will on another. Leadership isn't having power over other people, making everybody conform to what the leader says you must do. Sometimes we want our church to be like that, and sometimes it's been like that. The fact is, I think, at the time that this Gospel of Mark was written down, which was quite some time after these stories about Jesus had been told in the community, that the community of disciples was already changing, taking on sort of the contours of the Roman Empire in which the community had been sent out into. Leaders began to have special designations, special titles, wore special garments, had power over people.

Very much of our current church canon law gives some people power over other people. We haven't been really faithful to what Jesus said. A genuine leader in the community of Jesus isn't one who makes things happen through coercion or power, but is someone like Jesus who says, "When I am lifted up" -- and he means on the cross where he is totally helpless, without any power, a slave being put to death -- "When I am lifted up I will draw all people to myself through love." Not through coercion, not through power. "I will draw all people to myself." In the community of disciples of Jesus, those who want to lead must be those who are ready to serve to enable people to grow, not try to force anyone, not use power over anyone. Draw, make grow, cause to increase -- that's what the leader in the community of disciples does.

If we were authentically the community of disciples of Jesus, then we could confront the world in which we live much more effectively, and we could try to transform this world into the Reign of God, where there would not

be nations fighting against nations to have power over other people. We would be able to challenge our own nation.

Two things happened this week that I think indicate how as a nation, through our government at least, we're trying to exert power over others, be the superpower. President Bush signed this week that law that allows us, through him as our leader, to torture people, put them away in prisons where they have no recourse to any judge, even to find out if they are justifiably in prison. That's having power and that is wrong. To try to have power over people like that.

And the other thing that President Bush announced this week -- it didn't get as much attention, but it may be even more significant -- he renewed our commitment to have control of space. He said "We will not sign any treaty that would allow all nations to begin to exploit space in any way, including eventually, of course, militarizing space. We're the super-power, we will do it, and no one else will have the opportunity." How wrong that is.

But as a community of disciples of Jesus, until we learn how to give up power, to be leaders, to love though drawing people, until we become the community Jesus is trying to help us to be, there's no way we're going to confront our government or confront what is happening in the world and change it. We must undergo a deep conversion, and that's what Jesus is talking about on this whole journey to Jerusalem.

Today, as I said, it may be one of the hardest things he asks of us -- to give up power, to refuse to dominate, to refuse to coerce any other person, individually or as our church or as our nation.

And then Jesus teaches the disciples about letting go of the desire for prestige, what a normal thing that is. And so he uses a child. If you want to enter into the Reign of God, be like a child -- someone who isn't exalted generally, not looked up to, and give up prestige.

And then Jesus tells his disciples in the Gospel where John was complaining because "Someone is acting in your name and they're not part of us!" Jesus rebuked John and said, "No, no, if they're not against us, they're with us." He wants our community to be inclusive, not add barriers based on race, based on sexual orientation, based on ethnicity, no, no barriers -- be inclusive.

And then Jesus tells us in his community there will be equality. That was the Sunday where we talked about divorce and Jesus goes back to that myth, the Creation myth, which teaches that everyone is equal and so in the community of Jesus there's no some better, some less -- we're all equal -- everyone equal in freedom and dignity.

And this may be the hardest one, if not giving up power, what we learned last week. It's harder for a rich person to get into the Reign of God than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle and there's no loophole to that. Jesus meant it. It's like saying you have a better chance to get into heaven if you hang onto your riches than a snowball has in hell. That's about what he means when he says a camel can't pass through the eye of a needle. Jesus wants us to not depend on wealth. Depend on God.

It's a very difficult challenge to be a disciple because then we go on today to say give up power, give up wealth,

give up prestige. Each of us then, it seems to me, has to once more make the choice: Do I want to be a disciple of Jesus? Do I want to enter into the Reign of God? Do I want to help transform the world into the Reign of God, as closely as possible? It's our choice. No one forces us to be a disciple. But if we're going to follow Jesus then I hope we will continue to pray over these passages in the Gospel and to continue to hear where Jesus is calling us. Allow ourselves to be transformed in order that we can be authentic disciples of Jesus, individually, as a community here at St. Leo's, and in our whole church, so that the promise of Jesus can happen. The Reign of God is at hand. It will break forth once we, as his disciples, live up to the call that he's given to us.

Decide. Will we follow Jesus or not?

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