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God is waiting to be gracious

Thomas Gumbleton | Mar. 8, 2013 The Peace Pulpit

These lessons today fit in very well with our retreat. Two of them speak about the need for repentance, for changing our lives, being converted, so we need to listen to them deeply, but it?s important not to misunderstand what God is trying to teach us through this word today.

Third Sunday of Lent
Exodus 3:1-8, 13-15
Psalm 103
1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12
Luke 13:1-9

First of all, the parallel between the two events in the gospel lesson, where Jesus says, ?Unless you repent, this will happen to you. Unless you repent, you too will be destroyed.? It makes it sound like a very condemnatory way of God acting toward us, but the parallel between the two events is not really about God?s punishment of the people. But the parallel is the suddenness with which it happens.

The first event, the people who are revolting against the Roman occupiers -- the soldiers come in and kill them very quickly and suddenly. And the second event, the tower falls and people are suddenly killed without any warning. What Jesus is saying is that this kind of sudden end to your life could happen at any moment. That?s the parallel the gospel is trying to bring out.

That fits in very well with our first lesson today, when we?re instructed about who God is. ?I am who I am.? God is the one who is always, from all eternity and forever. God is existence, always is. Our existence is contingent upon God. We don?t exist by ourselves; we exist only because God has loved us into existence, and then God continues to sustain us at every instant. That?s what we can so easily forget.

So these two incidents in the gospel -- Jesus reminds us that any one of us, at any moment, our life could be gone, so we have to be aware of that, how dependent we are at every moment, every instant of our lives, on the God who is, who always is, and who draws us into being and sustains us in being. This helps us, if we reflect on this, to have a right relationship to God, remembering how much we depend upon God.

But then there?s more that we can learn from these events. It is important to do penance, not because God will punish us and throw us into hell if we don?t, but it?s important to be repentant, to have our sins healed, because that?s the only way we can move on and grow in God?s love. There?s a book by Henry Nouwen, called ?The Living Reminder.?

In the introduction to this book, he brings out so clearly why repentance is important -- not because, again, we?re afraid of God punishing us, but because it?s the only way we can move forward and become more like Jesus. He tells a story in the introduction to the book. He says, ?Let me begin by telling you a story about Elie Wiesel,? the great novelist. We?ve all heard of him. He experienced the Holocaust. He was in Hungary. His whole family was taken away and destroyed. He survived, and he?s written many things about his experience and what it meant to him.

This is what Nouwen tells us: One time [Wiesel] went back to visit his home town, the town of Sighet in Hungary. Then he remarks about it, ?I was angry when I went back to that town.? And he said, ?not because of what they had done to us, but because they had forgotten. It was as though the Jews were written out of history,

out of memory. Nobody even referred to the fact.? That?s what really made him angry. They had been disappeared from history.

Henry Nouwen then says there?s an important lesson in that, and the lesson is this (and it?s why we need repentance): ?A forgotten sin can never be healed and a sin that is never healed is always the cause of greater evil.? Then he applies it to the Holocaust. He says, ?A forgotten Holocaust can cause a Hiroshima. A forgotten Hiroshima can cause the end of our world.?

A terrible thing is to forget our sins, not to be in fear of God?s punishment, but so that we can be healed, and that we don?t let our sin be the cause of greater evil. It?s so true in our lives?if we forget our sins and bury them, they?ll never be forgiven, and they will be the cause of greater evil. Whereas, as we learned in the scriptures today, if we remember our sins, confess our sins, be open about our sins before God, God is always ready to heal.

We discover that in the first lesson, where Moses had kind of forgotten about his call to take the chosen people to freedom, but God had not forgotten. God had not forgotten about the people in their suffering, oppression and the terrible slavery. God was ready to heal, to free them from the burden of their enslavement.

In the examples that Paul gives us, when Paul tells us how the people at Corinth were forgetting about what happened to the Jewish people in the desert, again, God wasn?t threatening them; God was reminding them that yes, God did come and heal the people and God is always waiting to heal us. In fact, there?s a beautiful passage in the book of the prophet Isaiah that I think reminds us more than anything how God is always ready to heal, to make us whole.

It?s in the 30th chapter of Isaiah, where the prophet is preaching to the people: ??Woe to the rebellious children,? says God, ?They make plans which are not mine. They form alliances I did not inspire, thus add sin upon sin. They go down to Egypt without my advice to make alliance with pharaohs and seek his protection.?? And then they go on, Isaiah warns them not to make the alliance, not to go to war, but they do.

But then after they have been defeated and finally they are ready for forgiveness, Isaiah says, ?God is waiting to be gracious to you.? I think that?s the most beautiful description of God you could find. ?God is waiting to be gracious to you,? to each of us. If we open ourselves to God?s forgiveness, if we are ready to acknowledge our need of forgiveness; if we confess our sinfulness, not out of fear, but simply so that we can be healed, God is always waiting to be gracious to us.

I think that?s the message that we need to learn today as we continue to seek our conversion, to repent of our failures, and to recommit ourselves to follow Jesus as faithfully as we possibly can.

[Homily given at St. Joseph's Renewal Center, Brentwood, Long Island, NY.]

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