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We must reach out, teach others God's Spirit

Thomas Gumbleton | May. 2, 2013 The Peace Pulpit

Many times we have spoken and heard the Gospel at different times express ideas about the reign of God, the kingdom of heaven. What do we mean by that reign of God, what Jesus spoke about at the very beginning of his public life? "The reign of God is at hand. Change your lives. The reign of God is ready to break forth into human history in its fullness." We can speak about the reign of God as God's dynamic role of saving love over all of creation, over each one of us, over all of humanity, where God's love becomes the dynamic force energizing all of us and all of creation. The reign of God is the human community embracing God's saving love made present in Jesus.

I think if we listen deeply to our second lesson today, in very beautiful prophetic words, the seer John describes the reign of God: "I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The first heaven and the first earth had passed away. No longer was there any sea. And then I saw the new Jerusalem, the holy city, coming down from God out of heaven, and a loud voice came from the throne: 'Here is the dwelling of God among mortals. God will pitch God's tent among them. They will be God's people and God will be God with them -- Emmanuel.'"

That's the vision of what God is bringing about -- a new creation, everything made new, given fullness of life and energy. What happens then is we experience in this fullness of life joy beyond anything we can even speak of or imagine. "God will wipe every tear from their eyes. There shall be no more death or mourning, crying out or pain, for the world that was has passed away."

Fifth Sunday of Easter
Acts 14:21-27
Psalms 145:8-9, 10-11, 12-13
Revelation 21:1-5a
John 13:31-33a, 34-35
Full text of the readings [1]

In the commentary contained in this Bible concerning that passage, the commentators write, "God dwells among people and pours God's whole joy into them. The sufferings that fill so many lives, the martyrs, tortures, the inner pain of repentant sinners -- all this is over as God's reign comes into its fullness. Such joy and peace and fullness of life as cannot be found in any place on earth are finally found in the heart of God." That's the reign of God.

As you've heard me say many times, it's our responsibilities as disciples of Jesus not only to enter into that reign of God by responding to God's love present in our midst, but also to carry on the work of Jesus to transform our world into as close an image of the reign of God as possible. That's our call: to transform our world into this reign of God, where there'll be fullness of peace and life and joy -- the reign of God.

Our first lesson today shows us the first disciples after Jesus had died, risen from the dead. The Holy Spirit has been poured forth upon them. Now they're going out to begin to spread the good news -- "The reign of God is at hand" -- and they're prompted by the dynamic power of God's spirit to begin to spread that word. But as they do it, they're listening to God's spirit within them. So that's why, as they go out, Paul and Barnabas first sent forth by the church, they go first to the Jewish communities because Jesus had come to reform Judaism.

There's no indication that Jesus came to form a new church, but to reform Judaism, and so they go out and they preach in the synagogues, but then when they're rejected there, they listen to the Spirit, and now they go and they begin to spread the word among all the Gentile nations. They will be a light to all the nations of the earth. God's disciples, the church, begin to listen to God, and then they begin to change their pattern and go out to all

the nations.

If we're going to continue the work of Jesus to proclaim this coming of God's reign and to transform our world into that reign of God, we have to keep listening to God's Spirit also. As a church, we must listen to the Spirit. These first disciples, as I mentioned, went first to the Jewish communities, and then listening to God's word, they understood, "No, that's not enough. We have to be a light to all the nations."

Then, as St. Luke points out in our passage from the Acts, "As they returned back, retracing their steps to Antioch where they had started, they bring encouragement to each community," but then they also begin to do something new -- they began to establish an institutional church by putting elders over each community, overseers, the beginning of having bishops in the church. They only did that because they were listening to God's word. They knew that there had to be new ways to spread that word, to keep that word constantly present in our world, so they began to structure a church.

But it wasn't the end of God speaking. Now we have to rebuild and renew our church in this 21st century, so we have to be listening to God's word, listening to the Spirit among us. We need ministers in our church, obviously, and just as those first disciples decided to appoint elders in each community, we have to discover where God is calling forth people to minister, and to be courageous enough to do some new things. I'm not going to say exactly what those should be; the Spirit will tell us if we're open, and our church will listen.

We'll begin to establish ways that the word of God can continue to spread into every part of this world and transform our world into the reign of God. We have to pray for our church (maybe especially under the new bishop of Rome) that there be a willingness to begin to look for new ways to provide ministers in our church to carry out the message of God into every part of our world.

Now that's true -- not only within our church, but also each of us has to listen within my own heart and spirit, "What is God calling me to do?" Of course, it will be different for each of us, the specifics, but we do know from today's Gospel what God is really calling us to do in some way -- that is, to spread the message of God's love: "Love one another as I have loved you. This is how people will know that you are my disciples, because you love one another and you spread that love wherever you go." That's how the world will be transformed, if each of us listens to God's spirit to guide us how we will spread this love of God in our families, our communities and our country, throughout the whole world.

I just got back from the country of Haiti last night, and I want to tell you about some experiences that I had just in the last Friday and yesterday -- the last couple of days -- where I saw people really listening to God's spirit and acting in that spirit. First of all, it was within, as many of you know the clinic, Kay Lasante, that I've been supporting and part of ever since the pastor of the parish there, Fr. Gerry Jean-Juste, asked us to help bring this kind of medical care to his people.

This clinic is staffed by Haitians totally, many of them young people. As we finished our time with them, we had an open meeting where they began to share their experiences and what had happened as they, inspired by God's Spirit, not only were welcoming people to the clinic to give the primary care, whatever it was that they needed, but also going out into their homes for follow-up and bringing that love of God into this neighborhood, one of the poorest parts of Port-au-Prince. It was just overwhelming to hear them tell how God's love was working through them to heal people, not only physically but in their spirit, to bring encouragement and love and joy into their lives. You could tell that it transformed these young people, and I was just totally inspired by what they spoke of.

But then on Friday, there was one person, a youngster, who had a problem that we couldn't deal with at the clinic, and so we took this child with his mother over to a hospital that assists us. When we got there, we couldn't take care of that problem immediately but would at least be prepared for it to be done. But what

happened, there was another person there, a father with his 3-and-a-half-year-old child, a little boy, who had traveled three or four days before from the city of Jérémie, which would be about a five- or six-hour trip on a bus. He had borrowed money from the parish priest to come to bring his child to this hospital because that's the only place he could get the help the child needed.

This little boy had a very distended stomach. It was extraordinary, and it was because there was a tumor there, a tumor that almost certainly was cancerous. He would need chemotherapy, probably, and surgery, but the father of course had no resources. The first thing he needed was a CAT scan. The hospital couldn't do anything until they had the test, but they don't give those tests so he had to go to another hospital where they give the test, and then come up with $350 to pay for it.

We just happened to be there at the time he was dealing with the people at the hospital and they told us, "Can you do anything for this child?" Well, of course, we decided we would do whatever we could, and so it was agreed that they would keep the child in the hospital overnight with his father and then the next morning we would come, somebody from our clinic, and pick him up, take him to the other hospital where he could get the CT and then bring him back. The father was just overwhelmed with joy. It was amazing to watch how his expression turned from complete discouragement to joyful thanksgiving and love.

The most beautiful thing when we had arranged for all of this (and it was only by chance that we happened to be there, of course) was yesterday morning -- after he had his CAT scan and was brought back to the hospital where now he's going to be able to stay and get the treatments that he needed to prepare for chemotherapy and the surgery -- just before we left, we were saying goodbye, and this little child who had seemed so disturbed and so conflicted with pain and suffering broke into a huge smile, and then waved to us in a very beautiful way.

It was then that we found out his name was Emmanuel -- God with us -- exactly what it says in that passage from the Book of the Apocalypse: "They will be God's people; God will be God with them -- Emmanuel." I really felt, here is God speaking to us through this little child, Emmanuel, God with us. God was certainly present in all of those events. It happened to us only because we were ready to listen to God's Spirit, to respond, and then experience our love being returned to us -- through God with us.

That's how gradually, we will transform our world into the reign of God. When each of us and all of us always listen to God's Spirit, reach out in that kind of love that Jesus showed us and that Jesus asks us to show to one another. "Love one another as I have loved you," and God will always be with us -- Emmanuel -- and this world will begin to be transformed, ever more completely, into the fullness of God's reign.

[Homily given at St. Leo Church, 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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