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Listen to Jesus' teachings on prayer to enter into communion with God

Thomas Gumbleton | Aug. 1, 2013 The Peace Pulpit

If we listen deeply to today's lessons, I think we'll quickly notice that they follow on very clearly from last week's Scriptures and our reflection on those Scriptures [1]. You might remember last week's Scriptures spoke to us about hospitality, about discipleship, and about Jesus in his humanness -- needing friends and wanting to be a friend to all others -- those three things: hospitality, discipleship and Jesus as a friend.

Our first lesson today is really clearly a continuation of last week's account of Genesis, where Abraham and Sarah show extraordinary hospitality when three strangers come to their household. Abraham even runs out to greet them and brings them [in], welcomes them, and then together with Sarah, they provide a beautiful meal, and then provide rest and hospitality for the night.

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Genesis 18:20-32
Psalms 138:1-2, 2-3, 6-7, 7-8
Colossians 2:12-14
Luke 11:1-13
Full text of the readings

Today, we hear Abraham engaged in a dialogue with God that's really clearly based on the culture of Abraham and Sarah, where there was no such thing as set prices for anything. Everyone had to go back and forth, bargaining and haggling, until you came to an agreed-upon price. The thing that Abraham is where he's haggling in a sense with God, is because God is about to investigate what is called the outcry against Sodom [2] and Gomorrah.

Sodom and Gomorrah were notorious as places of sin, and if you read further after today's lesson, you discover that the sin really is a sin of failure to be hospitable -- in fact, even showing hatred and being ready to do criminal actions against visitors instead of welcome them with great hospitality. Because when, in this next passage, the strangers had left Abraham and Sarah and gone on to Sodom and Gomorrah, they were welcomed by Abraham's nephew, Lot.

Then after providing them the hospitality -- the meal and so on -- we discovered they had not yet gone to bed when men from the town surrounded the house. They were the people of Sodom -- young and old, the entire population. They called out to Lot and said to him, "Where are those strangers who arrived here tonight? Send them out so that we can force them into our fertility cults."

That was the sin -- a sin against hospitality -- and so it's very clear that again, God is teaching us how important it is to be hospitable, to be open, to be ready to receive others, not to put up barriers, not to have restrictions against interactions with others who come into our presence and who come to our homes, come to our communities. Clearly, even as we reflected last week, this means in our church, we have to break down the barriers that sometimes we have put up.

As St. Paul put it in the letter to the church in Galatia: "In the Christian community, there is neither Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, rich or poor; all are equal, all are welcome." We have to have inclusivity, draw people in and break down barriers in our church community, not push people away for any reason -- racial, ethnic group, different sexual orientation. All of those barriers have to come down.

But also in our country, of course, we have to welcome immigrants and refugees, try to be a hospitable nation known for receiving strangers into our midst and then being enriched by them. That's been our history; we need to reinforce that and make it happen again.

Clearly, the first lesson today is about hospitality, and it's important for us to continue to reflect on that in our everyday life -- in our parish life, our community life -- try to bring about changes if necessary. But now also discipleship -- discipleship, as we learned last week from Mary and Martha, Jesus talks about Mary as having chosen the better part because she sat at his feet to listen, and a disciple is one who listens and then who learns from what the disciple hears God saying, especially through Jesus.

That's what the disciples are doing today in today's Gospel. They have seen Jesus at prayer, and I'm sure it was a profound experience for them to watch Jesus, as he would sometimes go apart to be alone, to be in deep communion with God. As good disciples, they wanted to learn how to do that, so they come to Jesus and make the simple request: "Teach us how to pray, as John" -- that's John the Baptist -- "taught his disciples." So Jesus responds, of course, immediately with what is probably the original, the older form of what we call the Our Father.

Jesus teaches them to pray in this very beautiful, profound way: "Father, may your name be hallowed." Recognition of God as the other, hallowed, sacred, set apart, totally other from us; a God we worship; a God who has loved us into being; a God who has loved all creation into being; a God totally other from us. We pray that that God will be recognized and God's name that is God will be understood as the one who is responsible for our existence and of everything that exists.

We also pray, Jesus urges us, that what he proclaimed at the beginning of his ministry, "The reign of God is at hand," that that reign of God will come to its fulfillment. Then we will transform our world in such a way that everyone will have a full human life. All people will enjoy all the blessings that God has given to all and not only to a few. The reign of God -- that must be a constant yearning on our part, that this reign of God will come to its fullness and that we will enter into the work with Jesus to make the reign of God happen by transforming our world so that it gradually becomes the reign of God.

Of course, we ask for our daily needs, but not more than we need. We understand that God gave all the goods of the world for everyone, not just for a few, so we pray that each day, the kind of bread we need will be provided, and then if we don't exceed our needs, others too will be able to receive what they need. That's, in fact, how the reign of God will look -- when everyone has what is necessary for a full human life.

Then Jesus says, "Ask for our sins to be forgiven," and that happens especially as we also forgive those who do us wrong. Jesus wants us to be a person -- an individual -- but also a community of reconciliation where we reach out to one another, forgive and accept forgiveness. Reconcile: This is the prayer that Jesus urges upon us. Finally, "Do not bring us to the test"; that is, do not abandon us when we are tempted, when something is urging us or leading us into a wrong direction. Jesus urges us to pray that we will not be those who fail that test, and so we ask that we be guided and guarded against the test that we cannot meet.

If we truly listen to what Jesus teaches us about prayer today -- we try to pray in the spirit that he suggests -- we will be disciples who have learned how to enter into deep communion with God through Jesus. We can have total confidence in this prayer that Jesus teaches us, and that's why Jesus tells us the two short parables of today. He wants us to know, to have deep, clear assurance that God is in communion with us. God is ready to respond. In the words of Isaiah, "God is always waiting to be gracious to us, to pour forth God's abundance of goodness and love upon us."

Jesus tells this parable about the person who has a friend coming suddenly at night, and the person doesn't have

enough to provide a meal, so he goes to the neighbor. The neighbor doesn't want to be disturbed at first, but the person continues to make clear the need, and finally, as Jesus says, "Even though he will not get up and attend to you because you are a friend, yet he will get up because to refuse you would bring shame to him." Again, it's a throwback here in a sense, a restating of what we heard in the first lesson about hospitality, what we heard last week about hospitality.

It was such an important part of the culture of the time of Jesus that anyone who refused hospitality would be shamed, and so it would be a very important thing for anyone to avoid that kind of shame. It was considered to be so dramatically wrong to be inhospitable that no one would want to be like that. Jesus says he can't imagine someone in your town not being hospitable, and so you are assured, because if you pray, God is always going to be hospitable [and] open to your prayer. We can't imagine God not being like the person who welcomes the stranger into his midst or the visitor into his midst.

In the other parable, Jesus said, "If your child asks for a fish, will you give that child a snake? Or if a child asks for an egg, will you give the child a scorpion?" Of course not. Parents aren't like that, nor is God like that. We have this assurance that God will always provide what we need. If we continue to deepen our relationship with God, we have the assurance that God is always waiting to be gracious to us, waiting to pour forth God's love upon us.

Our second lesson today affirms and confirms this assurance that God is there for us always because St. Paul, in writing to the church at Colossae, reminds them about what happened at baptism: "On receiving it, you were buried with Christ; you died. But you also then, as you rose up from the waters of baptism, rose up with him because you have believed in the power of God who raised Jesus from the dead. You were dead, you were in sin, but God gave you life with Jesus, forgave all your sins, canceled the record of your debts."

God did away with all of that and made us God's sons and daughters, brothers and sisters to Jesus, and even beyond that, a deep friend to Jesus, and [he] made it possible for Jesus to be friend to every one of us.

As long as we continue to pray -- enter into communion with God in prayer through Jesus -- and as long as we continue to try to listen to Jesus, to be his disciples and try to follow him, we can have what our hymn calls that blessed assurance that God will always be there for us. God will always pour forth God's spirit upon us and draw us ever more deeply into communion with God through Jesus, God's son.

[Homily given at St. Hilary, Redford, Mich. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. **Sign up here** [3] to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

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