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

We must reach out in love to one another

Thomas Gumbleton | Sep. 26, 2013 The Peace Pulpit

When we reflect on the Scripture lessons at a holy Eucharist like this, it's always important to put our reflections within the context of our everyday life -- what's going on in our lives, what's going on in the world around us -- and then we draw from the Scriptures to see how it applies to our life as it is right now in these circumstances. This morning, I think it's very providential, almost, that we are celebrating the 50th anniversary of the high school class of St. Alphonsus.

That takes us back to 1963, and in the same month that you graduated, Pope John XXIII died, and that was a pope who really dramatically changed our church. Remember? I'm sure most of us do. He was a pope who went out among the poor; he was a pope who said Mass on Christmas in a prison; he was a pope that called the council that changed our whole church, made us aware that we are the church.

We are the people of God, and we have a mission to transform our world. This is what came from the council, and we have to continue to think about that as we reflect on our lessons this morning, but also what's going on in our world right now with the church especially.

Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Amos 8:4-7
Psalms 113:1-2, 4-6, 7-8
1 Timothy 2:1-8
Luke 16:1-13
Full text of the readings [1]

Pope Francis [is] amazing person. I'm sure all of us are thrilled, having watched over the past six months the kind of change that he has brought. Not really so much by what he said -- he's written no brilliant document and published it, as most popes do at the beginning of their papacy. He actually published one that was written by Pope Benedict and signed his own name to it with Pope Benedict.

But what he has done: He has been teaching us. He took the name Francis, and St. Francis of Assisi was one who told his disciples, "I want you to go out and preach. Go all over this area and preach, and sometimes if you need to, use words." In other words, Francis is saying you teach most of all by what you do, how you act, who you are. It's your life that teaches, and that's what Francis has been doing.

If we remind ourselves of this and reflect on some of the things he has done and said, then what is really the theme of today's lessons, I think, will come forth very clearly because the theme of today's lessons is that our salvation -- our entering into the fullness of God's life and joy, being really sons and daughters of God -- depends [on] and is very deeply entwined with how we relate to the goods of the earth. That's what the Gospel lesson is about: How we relate to the goods of the earth.

Now, it's a parable that seems very confusing. It seems that because in the parable, the owner, who is calling the manager to account, is the god, and God seems to be saying, "Well, this is great, what you did." You can tell it's a confusing parable because at the end of it, you get three or four sayings of Jesus that try to straighten it out a little bit: "No servant can serve two masters"; "you hate one, love the other"; "you can't serve God and money."

These sayings were put in there because people were struggling to understand. "What does Jesus mean in this parable? What's he really saying?" The answer is: This parable teaches us about how we are to interact and relate to the material goods of the earth, to all that God has created and given to us.

One of the things that servant learned that's a very important part of how we are to relate to the goods of the earth is that if you focus all your attention on trying to get more and more money, you can easily become separated from other relationships -- relationships with friends, even within your family. Money can become almost an obsession.

Michael Milken, you may remember a few years ago, one of the investors who had millions and millions of dollars and he kept doing more and doing it fraudulently and went to jail and only then learned how foolish he was. He had been so committed to making more and more and more and he couldn't stop. But what you lose out on when you do that, as the manager in today's Gospel shows us, you end up without friends, even intimate relationships in your own family.

There's a beautiful passage about friendship in the Book of Wisdom called the Book of Sirach: "The faithful friend is a sure refuge; whoever has found one has found a treasure. A friend -- a faithful friend -- is beyond all price. Hold your friend as priceless. Those who love God will find one." This manager reminds us of that because he says, "I have to stop worrying about all this wealth. I have to make sure I begin to develop friendships," and so that's what he would do now that he gives up his excess wealth.

Then the other lesson, of course, that Jesus teaches us through this parable is that we don't gather material wealth just for ourselves. We have to make sure that as we interact with the goods of the earth and we accumulate what we need so we can have a full human life, God doesn't want anyone to be destitute. But we have to understand that that means we have to be more like God, and that's the powerful lesson that this parable teaches us.

Just like last Sunday, remember the two sons: The one who went out and squandered everything, the other who thought of his father as a disciplinary and a rule-giver -- a master. He said, "I slaved for you all these years, you don't give me anything," but the father, representing God, is waiting for that son to come home. He goes out and meets him, and before he can ever say anything (which he planned to say, "I'm not worthy of being part of your family. Just let me be one of your servants"), the father overwhelms him with love, and, of course, that's an image of God -- always trying to enter our life with love, overwhelm us with love; but if we're so caught up in material things, God can't break in.

That's why Jesus shows us that God is always ready to reach out in love for us if we only turn toward God and don't become obsessed and to put all our security on material things. That's the same lesson as the prodigal son, but in today's parable, the owner almost disregards what the manager has done and overwhelms the manager again with love. That's the image of God that we need to deepen within our own hearts, and then our material things will fall into their proper relationship. We'll use them as we need them to build up our lives and to develop ourselves into the full person God wants us to be, but we'll always be focused on God first, responding to this overwhelming love of God.

I think that many of us have been so trained over the years to think of our relationship to God as something [like] "We do this and God gives us this reward." It isn't that way at all; God first loves us. God gives us everything -- our very existence, our very life -- and God sustains us and God's always there for us. If only we could truly draw that into our experience, let ourselves realize how God is almost foolish in the way God always is waiting to be gracious to us.

Because then, if we truly experience this love of God and understood how powerful and overwhelming and unlimited and unconditional that love is, then we would begin to use our material wealth, as our first lesson today especially tells us -- we won't hoard up things, we won't have everything for ourselves -- we'll share. We live in a world where that's so important in our everyday life, but also in our public policies.

I read just this morning an article about the state of Nevada (it's not about Michigan, so we don't have to feel quite so guilty about this), but can you imagine, over a period of time that when they monitored, they discovered, in less than a two-year period, 1,473 homeless people who are mentally ill were put on a bus and driven to other cities and dropped off.

They'd been given some packages of sandwiches and some water and medication for one day, and then they were just dropped in the street of other cities. That is so harsh and so cruel. How can that happen in a country that's so rich? It's because we don't have enough concern for the poor. We don't have enough concern for trying to be like God, who loves us without limit.

Or we have extended the Farm Bill. Do you realize that in that bill, there's going to be a cut of $4 billion a year for the next 10 years in food stamps for the poor, the one thing that keeps many, many people out of desperate poverty? But there's going to be $5 billion a year for farmers who live in cities and don't even farm, some of whom are in that Congress. They're going to get subsidies for not planting, for not farming.

Don't you think there's a better way we could distribute the wealth in our country than to give to people who don't need it -- millions of dollars for just owning land that's not even farmed -- and cutting what is desperately needed by the poor (taking food out of mouths of children, really)?

See, that's what we have to try to do, is understand that because God loves us so much and gives us our very existence and all that we need for a full human life, we must reach out in love to one another. That brings me back finally to Pope Francis; isn't it amazing how he's shown us so quickly, first of all, to live simply? He refuses to live as we've become accustomed to thinking is ordinary. It should never have been ordinary for the bishop of Rome to live in a huge palace, isolated from all other people, being driven around in huge limousines. Francis says, "No."

He lives in a hotel with other people; it's an apartment hotel inside Vatican City. He rides up and down the elevators with whoever comes along. He says daily Mass there for whoever comes. He's always available; people can walk up to him and talk to him. He's like an ordinary human being and he loves people, and he's shown us that. When the shipwreck happened at Lampedusa just off the shores of Italy, he immediately went to be with the people.

These are refugees who were fleeing from economic deprivation who had no other recourse. He goes to be with them and then he speaks -- not at great length, but he says, "This is the result of the globalization of our economy, that there's such unbalance but what's worse is that there's a globalization of indifference." He said, "We don't cry enough for those who are deprived and desperately poor."

He shows us one of the most extraordinary things in that interview that was published just a couple of days ago how God loves every one, and Francis is teaching this. He says, "Once a person asked me in a provocative manner if I approved of homosexuality. I replied with another question, 'Tell me, when God looks at a gay person, does God endorse the existence of this person with love or reject and condemn this person?' " Obviously, God loves every person, whoever he or she is: the rich and poor; the slave, the free; the male, female; gay, lesbian --everyone.

God's love is unlimited; that's what Francis is teaching us. He's embodied deeply the lessons of today's Scriptures, and if we begin to listen deeply to these same Scriptures and listen to him and follow his example, we'll become as individuals the people God wants us to be: People filled with love, reaching out with love to others and being enriched by giving always.

That's how God is toward us; that's how we must respond to God with love, but also and even more importantly,

to all of our brothers and sisters. Love God with your whole heart, mind and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself, because God loves us.

[Homily given at St. Alphonsus Church, Dearborn, Mich. 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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