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Prayer must start with praise, thanks for God

Thomas Gumbleton | Nov. 1, 2013 The Peace Pulpit

Now you may remember, because I mentioned it a number of times, our Gospel lessons over the last 12-14 weeks, through the summer and into the fall now, have been Luke's account of the last journey of Jesus with his disciples to Jerusalem, the journeys that he knew would end in his being shamed and being tortured and finally executed.

But along the way of this journey, Jesus has been teaching various ways, various times -- healing, reaching out to the poor, giving comfort to the afflicted, trying to bring justice to people -- and today once more, Jesus provides us with some teaching.

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Sirach 35:12-14, 16-18
Psalms 34:2-3, 17-18, 19, 23
2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18
Luke 18:9-14
Full text of the readings [1]

As last Sunday [2], today's teaching is about prayer. Perhaps it's good to recall that near the beginning of this journey, when the disciples asked Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray." They had seen him go apart by himself and become deeply engaged in communion with God, and they knew they needed to achieve that same kind of -- to go into the depths of their heart and to be in communion with God.

So Jesus did. He taught them the prayer that we say regularly -- and almost probably it's a prayer that's too familiar, and we don't always think about it as deeply as we should -- but it's the Our Father, the one where we praise God, call for God to reign, to come in its fullness. We pray for forgiveness for ourselves as we forgive others, and it's a beautiful, all-encompassing prayer. But now, Jesus once more is teaching us to pray, and maybe this is the most important lesson about prayer that we need to reflect on and make real to ourselves.

Last Sunday, you may remember, Jesus taught the disciples about praying with constancy, with perseverance. Not that they, with a certain number of prayers, would turn God around, but rather that they would pray with a continuing awareness that God is there ready to assist, even if it takes a long time, but we never give up.

So besides faithfulness in prayer, last Sunday, Jesus taught us it's important to pray as a community, to be with others who are praying at the same time, so we strengthen one another's convictions and faith and deepen our relationship with God through others.

But today, Jesus teaches us what perhaps is the most foundational part of praying, because at the beginning of the parable, Jesus tells the disciples that he is going to tell this parable "for the benefit of those who are fully convinced of their own righteousness, who are convinced that they are who they should be, what they should be, because of themselves." ... As this Pharisee goes into the temple to pray, [he] elaborates all the good things that he does, so he's responsible for that.

So what Jesus is trying to say, to start our prayer, we must be really justified, which means being in right relationship with God, faithful to our covenant relationships that were made for us through baptism, repeated regularly in the Eucharist. But be in this right relationship -- understanding who we are, who God is -- and then when we pray, we start from that awareness.

I am who I am because of God. I have been drawn into existence by God out of love. God's love drew me into

being; God's love constantly supports me. Everything I do is supported by God's loving me. I don't earn things from God because I do this, that, or the other thing.

You see, the Pharisee recited the good things he had done: "I fast twice a week. The law said once. I give a 10th of all my income. The law says, agricultural goods, a 10th of those." So he emphasizes, "I do this," and then to show how he's the one responsible, he looks over at that publican, the sinner. "I'm not like the rest of the people," and he puts him down. So he has been responsible for who he is in his goodness -- his shining forth -- in contrast to the poor. In this case, one who is almost certainly a sinner because his very work brings him into contact with Gentiles, which is against the law.

So this Pharisee is highlighting his goodness as though he is responsible for it, and it's not wrong to recognize that we've been blessed. When you look at how Paul writes about himself in his letter to Timothy, Paul is near his death, and he says, "As for me, I'm already poured out as a libation." He's being sacrificed now to his martyrdom: "The moment of my departure has come." Then Paul says, "I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith."

But Paul also says, "The Lord has been at my side, giving me strength to proclaim the word fully, and that all the pagans hear it, so I was rescued from the lion's mouth. God will save me from all evil, bringing me to God's heavenly kingdom, and so glory to God forever and ever." See, Paul has it right: His relationship to God, he understands, is that God has first loved him. God has brought him out of his sinful ways -- his lust and good ways at least -- and now God has prepared him for the fullness of life and in heaven.

But the key difference is the one person, besides his good qualities, [who] looks down on others who don't have them, puts himself over them, doesn't recognize that it's because there are good qualities, God has blessed him. The sinner recognizes, "I need God; God has to justify me, and God will justify me when I turn to God, express my sorrow for my failures. God is waiting to be gracious to me, to lift me up, to fill me with love and goodness."

So when we pray, it must always be from that awareness that it starts with God. In the first letter of John, there's a passage where John is trying to describe for us who God is and says, "God is love," and then reminds us, "Here's what love means: not that we have first loved God, but God has first loved us."

If we start all our prayer with that awareness -- God has first loved us -- then our prayer will be prayer that will be praise for God, thanks to God, sorrow for our failures, and petitions for our God's blessings, but always, we will be in a situation where God will be waiting to be gracious to us. God can hear our prayer when we come to God with that awareness that God first loved us, and never put ourselves over or above others, never put others down, but only be aware of how God has loved us, God has loved me.

If we pray in that way, well then surely, as our first lesson says today, "The one who serves God wholeheartedly will be heard. The prayer of the humble person pierces the clouds. The humble person's prayer will not cease until the Most High has looked down, until justice has been done in favor of the righteous."

In other words, until that right relationship with God has been established because we have come to God with an awareness that God first loved us. Then our relationship with God will continue to be one of thanks and praise and a response of love for all that God has first done for us.

Truly, I hope we can hear and learn this lesson about prayer. As I said at the beginning, it's probably the most important part of Jesus' teaching on prayer. If we hear it and act on it, then our right relationship with God will surely be established, and God will overwhelm us with God's love.

[Homily given at Mount Carmel Mission Basilica, Carmel, Calif. 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

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