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God's love draws us into existence, maintains us

Thomas Gumbleton | Feb. 20, 2014 The Peace Pulpit

It may be a little bit confusing to us at first that Jesus tells us that he has come not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. So it may be helpful for us to remind ourselves that Matthew's Gospel was written for a community of Jewish Christians -- people who were Jews but had also become followers of Jesus.

In this Gospel, Matthew, using the words of Jesus, is reassuring these Jewish Christians that God hasn't abolished the Jewish law and that Jesus hasn't come to take that law away. The 613 laws of the Torah, which includes the Ten Commandments that we all still continue to learn, Jesus says, "These still are God's law, but if you're going to follow me, then there's another whole set of values that go beyond those 613 laws of the Old Testament."

I think in a way, this becomes very clear in an incident that is recorded later in Matthew's Gospel, where Matthew tells about a young man who comes up to Jesus and says, "Lord, what must I do to gain eternal life?"

Jesus challenges him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? One only is good; if you want to enter eternal life, keep the commandments."

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Sirach 15:15-20
Psalms 119:1-2, 4-5, 17-18, 33-34
1 Corinthians 2:6-10
Matthew 5:17-37
Full text of the readings [1]

But the young man said, "Which commandments?"

Jesus says, "Do not kill; do not commit adultery; do not steal; do not bear false witness," and so on.

The young man says to Jesus, "I've kept all these from my youth," so he's still looking: "What more must I do to gain eternal life?"

And Jesus says, "If you wish to follow me, go sell all that you possess. Give the money to the poor, and you will become the owner of a treasure in heaven. Then come back and follow me."

Sadly enough, the young man, Matthew says, went away sad because he was a person of great wealth and he wasn't ready to follow Jesus. So what has become very clear there, Jesus is saying, "Yes, the commandments, the Jewish law -- this is important. We continue to follow it, but -- " and this was the Gospel just a few Sundays ago -- "the reign of God is at hand. The reign of God is ready to break forth in our world."

What is the reign of God? It's when God's dynamic love is something experienced by every person, and all of us are drawn into that love, aware of God's love, and follow God's love. That's the reign of God: When all of creation lives under this dynamic power of God's love, including every one of us, we follow the way of love, the way of God.

So that means, as Jesus said when he first proclaimed, "The reign of God is at hand; change your lives," there's a different value system for the reign of God than there has been in the past. Now you follow Jesus, who gives you, as we heard a couple of Sundays ago, the beatitudes: "Blessed are the poor. Blessed are those who are merciful. Blessed are the gentle. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice. Blessed are those who are

peacemakers." Jesus says these are the values that belong to the reign of God.

So if you really want to enter into God's reign, be converted and follow the way of Jesus. Today's Gospel tells us more and more how: "You have heard there was said of old of your neighbor, 'Hate your enemy.' I tell you love your enemy. You have heard it said of old, 'Thou shalt not kill. I say don't even be angry with your brother or sister.' "

And then reconciliation, Jesus has said, is so important in the reign of God that even if you're coming to worship -- you're coming to offer worship to God, which seems to be the most important duty we would have -- and you remember your brother or sister has something against you, you have offended them, don't bother to try to worship. Go and be reconciled.

This takes us far beyond "Thou shalt not kill." It's entering into our relationships of everyday life, and that we have to live according to a whole different set of values -- the values of Jesus. Again, trying to live within this framework of the reign of God means that we understand that God is a God who has loved our world into being, a God who has loved every one of us into existence, a God who continues to love us without limit, without conditions -- a God who is love.

"Where there is love," St. John says, "there is God. God is love," and that's how the reign of God exists -- through God's love, and Jesus is calling us to enter into that reign of God. St. John also in his letter says about, "What do I mean by the love of God? Not that we first loved God, but that God first loves us. This is the love of God." When we become aware of that truth about the reign of God, that the reign of God is the reign of God's love, drawing all of us into existence, sustaining us every moment of our lives, sustaining us for all eternity, that's the reign of God, the love of God.

When we become aware of this, then we can respond and try to live according to the value system that Jesus has laid out for us, which is a value system that takes us beyond the Ten Commandments and the 613 laws of the Torah and brings us into a value system that is that of Jesus, that of God.

In order for us to, I think, be converted as Jesus says and learn how to live according to this new value system and be really motivated to live according to this value system, it's important for us, I think, to have a profound awareness of this truth about God: that God is love, and that it's God's love that draws us into existence and maintains us.

Where do we learn about this love of God? Well, we learn through the presence of Jesus in our lives and the Scriptures, but also we can learn about it from one another as each of us tries to follow out the law of God's love by being aware that God loves us, and that we then respond with love. I think we can find our best example of this in the people we celebrate today during this liturgy.

As Sister Marie announced at the beginning, we're celebrating people who have been married and who have nurtured married love within their lives. I think this surprises married people, but for me, it absolutely has to be the truth: The married vocation is the most important vocation in the church because married people, according to the commitment they make when they become married to one another, are those who are called to witness to the very love of God in our world.

The married people that are here today probably don't remember this prayer, but it was spoken at your wedding. It's a beautiful prayer: "God, you have made the bond of marriage a holy mystery, a symbol of the love of God for God's people. Hear our prayers for Joseph and Mary (or whoever). With faith in you and in each other, they pledge their love today. May their lives always bear witness to the reality of that love."

You see what that prayer is saying? It's saying that married people are a symbol, when they live out their

married vows, of their very love of God because the sacrament of marriage is that symbol of the love of God for God's people. Married people make the commitment to love one another, and their lives bear witness to the reality of their love, and the love of God for every one of us.

What more important witness is there to be given within our church? That's the witness that all of us need to experience: how the love of God has lived out by married people, the kind of love that Jesus said, "Love one another as I have loved you, and there's no greater love than this than to lay down your life for the one you love." See, it's unlimited, unconditional, everlasting love. That's what married people pledge to one another and try to live out in their married life.

As they do it, they bear witness to all of us of the truth that their love is simply a reflection of the love of God for all of us. If we are able to experience that, witness and cherish it, and be thankful for it, and try to follow where that witness leads us, that God loves us and we must try to love God according to the way of Jesus and the value system that Jesus teaches us, then the reign of God, which is God's love carried out throughout all of the universe, that reign of God will break forth even more fully in our world.

So we thank God for the married people in our midst today, and we pray that God will help them to continue to fulfill their vocation -- to be witnesses of the unending, unlimited, unconditioned love of God in our world for every one of us. As their witness is more full and true, our church -- all of us -- will become more faithful disciples of Jesus.

[Homily given at St. Hilary Parish, Redford, 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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