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# The wisdom of God is stronger than ours

Thomas Gumbleton | Feb. 27, 2014 The Peace Pulpit

To begin our reflection today, it?s important once more to go back to the beginning of this series of teachings that Jesus is giving us that make up the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus had told his disciples, ?The reign of God is at hand; change your lives.? ?The reign of God is at hand; change your lives,? so that you may live in that reign of God where God?s love permeates everything.

All of creation is living according to the law of God?s love, and all of the people that God has created ? all men and women, everyone ? is under that reign of God?s love so that we live in a way that every person has a fullness of life. We find peace and joy. All the good things that God has given for all are shared by all.

This is the reign of God, but it?s at hand. We only enter into it when we change our lives according to the way of Jesus. That is what he?s been teaching us in the Sermon on the Mount, starting with that value system we call the beatitudes: ?Blessed are the poor; blessed are the humble; blessed are those who are gentle; bless those who seek justice; blessed are those who are peacemakers; blessed are those who are sincere of heart.? These are the values that Jesus makes his own and that he lives and proclaims to us as the way we must live in the reign of God.

**Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time**
Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18
Psalms 103:1-2, 3-4, 8, 10, 12-13
1 Corinthians 3:16-23
Matthew 5:38-48
Full text of the readings [1]

And then last week Jesus said to the Pharisees and scribes, who were concerned about how he was maybe destroying all that God had promised to the people of old, he said, ?No, I have come not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it ? to transform it, to make the law now a law fitting for the reign of God,? and Jesus really does show us how he goes beyond what is contained in the law.

Our first lesson today from the book of Leviticus starts off with a challenge for us. When God spoke to Moses and said, ?Tell the entire assembly and the people of Israel, say to them, ?Be holy, for I, your God, am holy.?? That means be set apart; be people who draw attention to themselves because they live according to God?s way.

They give up vindictive violence towards others. They must not harbor a hatred in their heart, and that?s contained in the words Moses tells them: ?Do not hate your brother or sister or your heart. So not seek revenge or nurture a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself.? A challenging law that Moses taught on behalf of God to God?s chosen people so that they could be set apart, and then be of people that help others to recognize the one and true God. That is their challenge and their mission: To be a people who are different, and thereby manifest God to those all around them.

That?s a beautiful law and one that Jesus says, ?I haven?t come to abolish, but to fulfill, to transform,? and that?s what we hear in today?s Gospel lesson. In fact, it?s a part of it that I think is important to go back to, where, at the very beginning of this, Jesus said, ?You have heard of old thou shalt not kill, but I say to you, do not even be angry with your brother or sister. Even if you are going to offer your gift at the altar, there you remember your brother or sister has something against you, go first and be reconciled. Ask forgiveness; give forgiveness; be reconciled. Only then come and offer your gift.?

In other words, even that most important action we can do, worshipping God, is impossible unless we are reconciled to our brothers and sisters. But Jesus goes even beyond that in today?s passage where he says, ?You have heard that it was said an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but I tell you do not oppose violent evil with violence. If someone slaps you on your right cheek, turn and offer the other. If someone wants your coat, give them your cloak also. If someone wants you to go one mile, go two.?

In other words, Jesus is saying we don?t try to just be on an equal basis ? an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth. If we?re harmed or people injure us in some way, we go beyond. So when someone does violence against us, we don?t do violence in return. Instead, we find a way to avoid that violence ? turn the other cheek; make it impossible for the person to strike you. Or make it clear that if someone wants your coat, you go beyond that and give them your coat also. You exceed what they?re asking through love. A huge demand, but it?s the way that we should live within the reign of God.

But even more, the final thing: ?You have heard that it was said of old love your neighbor, hate your enemy, but I say to you love your enemy.? Did you hear that? Love your enemy; do good to the one who hurts you; return good for evil. It seems impossible ? it seems unwise, unreal ? and yet this is the value system that Jesus asks us to live if we?re going to be converted and enter into the reign of God.

It?s a value system that will change our world, change all of our relationships within our human family, change even our relationship with the world around us ? a value system that goes with being in the reign of God, where God?s love permeates everything. And I agree it?s a very difficult value system to live up to. In our daily lives, someone offends us. Our first instinct is to respond with anger or with retaliation, vengeance, get even. We have to try to restrain ourselves to be converted ? to know that by reaching out with love, we can turn an enemy into a friend. We can transform relationships.

But it goes beyond that ? our personal interactions with one another. Those are very challenging, and I?m not here to say that any of us can do it immediately or without a struggle, but with God?s help, we can be converted. We can go beyond the letter of the law and live according to the reign of God and the value system of that reign of God. But beyond our individual interactions with other people, I think it?s also important for us to look at what we do as a nation.

Yesterday I was asked to give a presentation regarding the war that we?re currently engaged in where we are using drones to kill people, especially in Pakistan and Yemen ? other places, but those places especially. A leader of our government, speaking on behalf of the administration some time ago, called what we?re doing ethical and wise.

Do you know what we?re doing? We?re waging war and the White House counterterrorism advisor, John Brennan, called what we?re doing ethical and wise. What are we doing? We?re using these drones ? and I?m sure you?ve heard of them, these small, pilotless planes that hover above people a thousand, tens of thousands, or thousands of feet above them and release missiles or bombs that kill people.

Now Mr. Brennan says that we have a right to do this, and he tries to justify. He calls it ethical by saying that they present ? the ones we?re killing ? present an imminent danger to us. Now there?s no theology in the

Christian tradition about war, even what we call ?just war,? that justifies a preemptive attack. According to that theology, we must be under immediate attack, or threat of immediate attack, and it has to be clear.

Here we are picking out people in remote parts of the world, where it would be too dangerous for us to put in ground troops. It would be very difficult an area to wage war so far from where we are; the terrain is so difficult. So we wage war with these pilotless drones, and this is what Mr. Brennan says is wise. Our own military are not in any danger. They?re thousands of miles away flying these planes remotely ? pushing a button that allows the missiles to be fired or the bombs to be dropped, and it brings about terrible consequences.

I?ll give you just a couple of examples. These are from a report by *Amnesty International*: ?In one attack, 18 male laborers, including at least one boy, were killed in a series of U.S. drone attacks in a remote village. Missiles first struck a tent in which some men had gathered for an evening meal after a hard day?s work, and then struck those who came to help the injured from the first strike. Witnesses described a macabre scene of body parts, blood, panic, and terror, as U.S. drones continued to hover overhead.?

These are ordinary villagers ? farmers, ordinary people ? being killed in a far distant place by remote controlled planes that our military used to kill them. Another terrible incident reported by *Human Rights Watch*: ?A Toyota Land Cruiser carrying 14 people was attacked by a war plane or a drone near the provincial city of Radda in central Yemen. The strike by missile killed 12 passengers in this bus, including three children and a pregnant woman. A 13th passenger and the driver were severely burned, but survived.

One of the witnesses said, ?I heard a very loud noise, like thunder. I looked up and saw the planes; one was firing missiles. Rushing to the scene in the hamlet, about seven kilometers north of Radda, residents found a horrific sight. The battered Toyota Land Cruiser that had been served as a daily shuttle service between two cities, lay on its side in flames. Charred bodies had been flung from the vehicle and lay on the road, dusted with flour and sugar that the victims were bringing home from market.?

?Everyone killed was a resident of the village or the neighboring hamlet, and how gruesome it is. About four people were without heads; many lost their hands and legs. These were our relatives and friends. Two victims were a woman and a girl clutched in a lifeless embrace. The bodies were charred like coal. I cannot recognize the faces,? a 23-year-old farmer said when he looked upon them. But moving in closer, he realized that the woman and the girl were his mother and 10-year-old sister. He also saw his father among the dead. ?That is when I put my head in my hands and I cried.??

Now, we justify that: ?We must wage this war,? our administration says. We?re not under attack. We?re not justified in killing people in this preemptive way because we think they might be preparing to attack us at some time. But the people we?re killing are ordinary villagers, citizens ? men and women and children ? and they?re blown apart in this horrendous, horrific way. How can we ever justify that? And yet, that is what we?re doing when we wage this war.

Now, not only does that not stand up against this theology of this war, but certainly if we?re trying to follow Jesus, if we hear today?s Gospel message where Jesus says, ?You have heard it was said of old love your neighbor,? which is what we heard in the book of Leviticus in our first lesson, but go beyond that ? love your enemies. Even if these people were our enemies, we would be called to respond to whatever violence they perpetrate or intend to perpetrate not with hatred, not with violence, but with love.

Yes, I agree it?s a very high standard, but it?s what Jesus calls us to if we are to really follow his way ? be converted, enter into the reign of God ? and ultimately, it?s also a wise way of acting. Mr. Brennan said, ?Our attacks are wise because we don?t have any danger of losing our own troops, and we can wage this war without having to deal with the difficulties of the terrain or the remoteness of the area.?

He thinks that?s wise, and I guess in a way it is wise ? according to the standards of this world, not the reign of God. But if we listen to our second lesson today where Paul is speaking to the church in Corinth, [he] reminds them that, ?You are God?s temple. God?s spirit abides in you.? God?s temple is holy; you are this temple, so we must be different if we?re really the body of Christ ? the temple of God.

If we live according to the way of Jesus, then, as Paul goes on to explain, ?Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you considers yourself wise in the ways of the world, then become a fool so that you may become truly wise.? But Paul is referring to something that he says earlier in this letter to the church of Corinth, where he says, ?Look, I came to proclaim a crucified Christ. That?s the good news of the Gospel ? a crucified Christ.?

And Paul says, ?This is the good news because it shows us how to live according to the wisdom of God.? Paul says, ?Yes, a crucified Christ ? a Christ who allows himself to be tortured and killed in that ignominious way on the cross. Yes, a crucified Christ,? Paul says, ?is a scandal to the Jews.? They could not accept a God who would allow that to be done, but it?s also ? and Paul says ? a scandal to the Jews and an obstacle to those who say they are wise.

It?s foolishness to the pagans, a scandal to the Jews, and foolishness. But then Paul says, ?And yet, the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the powerlessness of God is stronger than human strength.? God?s way is the only way ? the truly wise way ? this way of giving ourselves over in love, even to our enemy.

Contrary to what Mr. Brennan tells us is wise, I can tell you about a young girl in Pakistan who became very famous. She is a young girl going to school ? cherishes the idea of getting an education, and desires that education above all else and feels this is what will help to change her country, help her to move forward in the world. But because she was advocating education for girls, she was attacked by the Taliban ? shot in the head.

But extraordinary medical care which she was able to receive, part in her country but then in Great Britain, she recovered and she?s become a hero to the world because she was advocating for peaceful change in her country and against the violence of the Taliban. Because of her international acclaim, she was invited to the White House to visit with President Obama and his family, and she offered there, in the White House, some wisdom which we have not accepted.

When she met with President Obama and his family last October, she spoke to them about the terrible effects of the CIA drone program on rural Pakistan. In an official statement released after the visit, she?s quoted as saying, ?I express my concerns that drone attacks are purely terrorism. They?re making terrorists; innocent victims are killed in these acts and that leads to resentment among the Pakistani people.?

So she urged our President: If we focus efforts on education that will make a big impact. In otherwise, spend your resources to help the people of Pakistan ? and especially girls like herself to be educated. They can change their country from within without being attacked ? without our killing so many of them in what we think is a wise effort, according to Mr. Brennan. But her wisdom certainly seems more like the wisdom of God, the wisdom of Jesus, and the wisdom that Paul calls us to.

?Wisdom of this world,? Paul says, ?is foolishness in God?s eyes.? To this, Scripture says, ?God catches the wise in their own wisdom.? It also says, ?God knows the reasoning of the wise according to the world?s way. That reasoning is useless.? I hope we might learn from someone like this young girl what is truly a wise way to act, the way of Jesus ? moving beyond the law as it was, ?Love your neighbor, hate your enemy, love your enemy.?

We must learn that, and perhaps come to understand that this really is the wisdom of God and that that wisdom

of God is wiser than, or even what we would call foolishness of God, is wiser than human wisdom and stronger than human strength.

Again, I urge all of us: Remember the reign of God is at hand; be converted. Spend time in prayer trying to absorb this message of Jesus, and pray for the guidance and the strength to live that message so that the reign of God, which is at hand, can come into its fullness in the life of each one of us. Be converted; the reign of God is at hand.

[Homily given at St. Leo Church, Detroit, 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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