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'Fasting,' 'obedience' take on different meanings during Lent

Thomas Gumbleton | Mar. 13, 2014 The Peace Pulpit

One of the puzzling things that I always think about first of all when we have this Scripture passage about the temptations of Jesus: Were they really temptations? I mean, could Jesus really have said "Yes" to Satan? He's the son of God; could he have sinned? Well, we have to remember that Jesus was also fully human, and this is one of the ways in which the mystery of the incarnation becomes so real.

Yes, he's fully human as well as being son of God, and so Jesus could have sinned. He could have been disobedient, and in a way, I think this son of Jesus, if he had said "Yes" to Satan, would have been a more horrendous sin than anything any of us could ever commit because Jesus was a full human being. He wasn't diminished as all of us are in some way, where we would struggle to be good.

I think of that woman that's been in the news who drove her minivan into the ocean with three kids trapped in their seats. A troubled person, so her guilt would be diminished, even though the crime would be horrendous. But Jesus was in no way diminished, and so yes, he could have sinned. In fact, in Luke's Gospel, it says that the devil left him for a time, and so throughout his life, Jesus had to struggle as we do because he's fully human. He had to keep saying "yes" to God, "yes" to God; "no" to evil, "no" to sinfulness.

First Sunday of Lent
Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7
Psalms 51:3-4, 5-6, 12-13, 17
Romans 5:12-19
Matthew 4:1-11
Full text of the readings [1]

I think if we let that sink in, it makes us more aware of how important Jesus can be in our lives in showing us the way to be obedient to God and say "yes" to God and "no" to sin. But then as we reflect further on today's Scriptures, it's important to be aware, as Scripture commentators point out very readily, that each time Jesus is challenged by the devil, he responds to the devil in words that are taken from the book of Deuteronomy, a book that describes much of what happened as the chosen people were traveling through the desert to the promised land.

At the beginning of the passage where these words that Jesus uses are drawn from, the writer says -- and this is the most important command given to Israel -- "Listen, Israel (Israel is the chosen people), listen. Yahweh, our God, is one God. You shall love God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength. You shall not put God to the test as you did in Massah.

"Repeat them over to your children; speak of them when you are at home and when you travel, the commandments that I pass on to you today. Brand them on your hand as a sign; keep them always before your eyes. Engrave them on your doorposts and on your city gates." So this was the ultimate commandment God gave to the chosen people.

"The Lord, your God, is one God alone. You must obey the Lord, your God, with all your heart, your mind, and your strength." And as we go through the book of Deuteronomy and the other books that recount the history of the chosen people through the desert, we find that they often failed. They did not keep that commandment to love the Lord, their God, with all their heart, soul, mind and strength.

But now we have Jesus as a contrast to the chosen people, the obedience of Jesus compared to the disobedience of the chosen people going all the way back to Adam and Eve. As we now celebrate this season of Lent, our

goal must be that we more and more become aware of how Jesus did obey God in every instance, and that we must try to, in our own lives, be more obedient, totally obedient to God in every way.

Of course, this is very challenging, but if we were blessed to be at the Ash Wednesday services of this past week, the Gospel lesson there, that evening or that day, shows us in what ways we must follow Jesus and be obedient. But it's important to, I guess first of all, remind ourselves what we mean by being obedient. It doesn't just mean following instructions. It doesn't mean blind obedience -- whatever the rule says, whatever the law says.

No, obedience actually is something more profound than that. The word "obedience," its root meaning, is to listen deeply. And on Ash Wednesday, in the Gospel, one of the things that we were encouraged to do was to go apart by ourselves to our room and to pray, to enter into communion with God.

See, not to be asking God for all things -- anything, many things. That's what we often think of prayer -- we ask God for blessings and favors. But prayer is more deep than that. The kind of prayer that Jesus is encouraging [is] to go deeply within our own spirit and listen to God, who is present in our heart. That's what we mean by obedience: to listen deeply.

So if we listen deeply to God during this season of Lent in order that we can be converted -- to be changed, to become more like Jesus, obedient in the deepest way -- we can again turn to Ash Wednesday's Gospel. One of the things that was suggested for us is to give alms and to do it in a way that we're not expecting to be praised and overwhelmed with the gratitude of the people to whom we give the alms.

Jesus said, "Don't even let your right hand know what your left hand is doing," but be generous. If we listen deeply, I'm sure we will begin to understand that we have more than we need and we should be giving it away to those who are in extreme need.

There was a beautiful example of this the other day. I heard about it on the radio. When that terrible apartment fire happened, in a matter of a very short time, the building was totally ablaze. People were even jumping from the second and third floor in order to escape the flames, and the building's totally burned. Everything they owned is gone; these people are totally without any resources.

Help began to come, but the thing I heard that impressed me was [that] one person living in Allen Park heard about it, and he said, "Those people are in desperate need. I can help them." So he went to his closet and began to take out the extra clothing that he had, and he had plenty of it, as most of us do. He put it into bags and then drove over there and gave it to the people who, at this point, were staying in a nearby church.

See, that's spontaneous giving, but it ought to be the spirit of giving that we carry on. Not just during Lent, but we deepen our awareness of the need to do it during Lent, and we carry it on. If we listen deeply to Jesus during this season of Lent, I think we might really begin to understand [that] all of us live in a culture where wealth is glorified, made to seem to be the most important thing there is -- get more and more. We need to develop that spirit of giving -- letting go; have what we need, but not pile up more than we need.

So that is one of the ways, if we listen deeply to Jesus, we might change our lives; but then also fasting. That was the other thing pointed out in the Gospel on Wednesday, and fasting is ... we think of it almost immediately as not eating as much as we usually eat, giving up food or drink.

But there's a passage in the book of the prophet Isaiah. It says this: "Is fasting merely bowing down one's head, making use of sackcloth and ashes? Would you call that fasting? No, God says, see the fast that pleases me. Breaking the fetters of injustice; unfastening the thongs of the yoke; setting the oppressed free; breaking the yoke of injustice." That's fasting: Acting to change our world in such a way that everyone has an opportunity for

a full human life. Everyone can share in the gifts that God gave for all, and not for a few.

And there are ways that we must change our economic system, our legal system, so that everyone has a chance for a full human life. We live in a situation where, as we know, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, and part of it has to do with such things as the fact that the heads of corporations are paid tremendous amounts of money -- 260-some times what the ordinary worker gets.

The ordinary worker, in many instances, [receives] less than a minimum wage, so you work full time and you can't even get out of poverty. You may be trying to support a family. We need to change that, and there's efforts going on to change so that everyone would be paid a just wage. A chance to work, yes, but then to earn enough to support themselves and their family.

So if we're going to do fasting during Lent, think of it in those terms of Isaiah: Breaking the unjust fetters; bringing justice to everyone so everyone has a chance for a full human life. Listen deeply to God -- that's what obedience means. So as we begin now these six weeks of Lent, I hope that all of us will try to be obedient more than we've ever been before, but not in terms of simply keeping a written law, following instructions.

But become obedient by trying to listen deeply to what God is saying in the depths of our heart. And as we listen deeply, follow Jesus as he shows us his obedience in contrast to Adam and Eve; in contrast to the people in the desert. Jesus is the one whom we must try to follow. Listen deeply and follow Jesus; change our lives.

[Homily given at St. Hilary Parish in 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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