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Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Feb. 12, 2009 The Peace Pulpit

If we take some time this morning to probe these scriptures a bit, two things can happen. First, we will come to know, I think, in a deeper way, that Jesus is truly human, truly our brother, one like us in every way except sin. It's important for us to know this because that's how we can relate to Jesus as someone like us, one who can become our friend. Otherwise, if we think of Jesus only as God, we must be in awe and trembling before the God who is a total mystery to us, the God who is the maker of all things, the God who is infinite, the God who is all-powerful and the God who is without beginning or end, the God who is beyond us totally.

But in Jesus, we can relate to him as one like us, so through him we begin to relate to God in a way that is possible for us to have God become truly part of our lives. So it's very important that we know Jesus in this human way. The other thing though, as we listen to this gospel and lessons today and try to pray them carefully, we will find it very challenging. Probably more challenging than we really might want, because God is asking of us to make tremendous changes in our lives.

First of all, knowing Jesus -- what happens here is something that happened already at the time of the baptism of Jesus. I suppose most of us have a sense that, well, Jesus is God so he knows everything. He knows what his life is supposed to be. There is kind of like a divine script written for him; all he has to do is carry it out and live it. But that isn't the case. Jesus is truly human. If you recall, at the time of his baptism, he has this profound experience of God. The spirit comes upon him in a very powerful way.

He hears God speaking, "You are my chosen, my beloved, the one in whom I am well pleased," that passage from the 42nd chapter of Isaiah that is a call to bring about tremendous changes through love and nurturing, not through power and force. When Jesus has that experience, Mark, in fact, in his gospel, says that he was driven into the desert. He goes away to pray and he spends six weeks in prayer and fasting, deep communion with God, because Jesus is trying to discover if he is the Chosen One, what is God asking of him? What is his life to be?

As you may remember, when he comes back, he has a clearer understanding because he goes into the synagogue at Nazareth and proclaims that he is here to bring good news to the poor, set the downtrodden free, heal the broken-hearted and all that -- he's here to change the world, so he has a mission. In today's gospel, it's the same thing. Here he is, performing these marvelous works of healing, love, nurturing, reaching out. People come to him throughout the whole night and he spends time with each one.

That village of Capernaum wasn't that huge so the numbers weren't overwhelming, but because he took time with each person and reached out in that tender love, it took most of the night. Then when it quieted down, Jesus is wondering again, "Is this what my mission is?" He goes out by himself, finds that deserted place (maybe it's

even where he had been in the desert before), and he prays. He's discovering, what is his task.

This happens on one other occasion at the end of his life. In John's gospel, it's perhaps the version John has of the agony in the garden, where Jesus is being proclaimed as a messiah, the wonder worker, the one who can draw all people because of the great things he does and he says, when he's deeply troubled in spirit and he has become aware that he's about to die, and he cries out almost in agony, "Shall I ask for the burden to be taken away? No. This is why I have come," and he moves forward into his passionate death.

In today's gospel, the disciples are all excited, "Stay here. Look what you can do. You can have a beautiful life reaching out, healing people." But Jesus knows there's more. He has been praying and he knows, yes, this is part of what he has to do, but his work is far more challenging than that. He is to proclaim the reign of God, the transformation of our world into as complete an image of that reign of God as possible. So Jesus has to call for what you might call a complete overhaul, a totally new creation, the new world and humanity that the prophets, including Jesus, dreamed and spoke about.

That's what he's here to do -- to proclaim that reign of God and to live in such a way as to make the reign of God begin to happen. We don't have to spend very much time thinking about what we heard in the first lesson today from the book of Job. It seems almost overstated and yet, Job, as you know the story, was a good person who suffered terrible calamities, and he is almost in despair:

"Man's life on earth is a thankless job, his days are those of a mercenary. Like a slave he longs for the shade of evening, like a hireling waiting for his wages. Thus I am allotted months of boredom and nights of grief and misery. In bed I say, 'When shall the day break?' On rising, I think, 'When shall evening come?' and I toss restless till dawn. My days pass swifter than a weaver's shuttle, heading without hope to their end."

A tragic description of human life in a very tragic way. Job, without knowing Jesus, seemed almost to be a person without hope. Jesus knows that he has come to change that terrible situation, to change our world, to preach a radical gospel that can bring about a transformation of the world as we know it, into the reign of God, that time and place where God's will is fully received and carried out, where there will be full peace, joy, fullness of life for every person -- the reign of God.

But this is where the challenge comes. The reign of God doesn't just happen. Jesus says there's a new way to live. We begin to understand the values that Jesus is calling for, or at least we begin to hear them. The Sermon on the Mount: Blessed are the poor, the gentle, those grieving, those who hunger and thirst for justice, those who are peacemakers, even those who suffer persecution -- all of them are the blessed ones, a whole different set of values to live by.

So this morning as we understand how Jesus chose not to have the comfortable life of staying in Capernaum, being a hero and having people come constantly to receive his blessings and his care; he has to go beyond that, and as we go with Jesus, we begin to understand that we too have to change our lives. If we really want the reign of God to break into our world, to break into my life, it's important that I begin to live according to those values.

At this point in our history, the history of the world, the history of our country, radical changes are called for if

we want, especially, peace to break forth in our world. In the last year of Pope John Paul's life, 10 or 11 months before he died, he made his last trip away from Rome and he went to Spain. There, he proclaimed to hundreds of thousands of people how the world needs peace, we must have peace. It became like a mantra -- peace is what we need in this world.

Then, the next day when he was preaching to tens of thousands of young people, he pleaded with them, "Reject all violence." Reject violence. He said, "Always respond to all violence with the fascinating power of love." He begged them, "Become artisans of peace," and I think at that point in John Paul's life, it was during the time when the second Persian Gulf war had begun and he had tried so hard to prevent that war. He knew that war is all useless, nothing but a failure for the human race. War can never be a victory; it's always a failure.

He knew that, so he was more intent than ever in trying to get those people that he preached to, especially the young people, to have a whole different attitude, to be artisans of peace. An artisan is someone who has a dream or a vision -- a painting, a sculpture, something you can envision -- and you make it happen through your skills and your long, difficult work. Be artisans of peace. Be like Dr. King, "I have a dream." When he proclaimed those words it seemed impossible, but he had that dream and that vision and he worked, even gave his life for it, and it began to happen, not fully completed but it's happening because he was willing to live the way of Jesus, which is the way of active love, or non-violence.

I think this is the most challenging part, when Jesus says, "I must go to proclaim the reign of God," the most challenging part is this part: "Don't just love those who love you; love your enemy. Do good to the one who hurts you. Return good for evil."

We haven't really taken that seriously, have we? We even think it's impossible. How many times have you prayed the "Our Father"? When we get to the point, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Those words come so easily, we say them so unthinkingly most of the time. What if we said, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" -- and we said - "those who perpetrated the terror of 9/11. Forgive them. I must love them. I must love those who hurt me. I must return good for evil"?

That would really be breaking the cycle of violence. We must do that in our everyday life; in our relationships within our homes, at our workplaces, in our communities, within our nation, within the world. Are you ready to really listen deeply to what Jesus says? "I must go beyond Capernaum. Yes, what I've done here is part of what the reign of God is about, but there is so much more."

This morning as we listen to these scriptures, Jesus is asking us to come with him, to be part of his work, to make it a part of our life. Like St. Paul in the second lesson today who says, "I am bound to proclaim the good news. I must preach the gospel. I must live it. I don't deserve any reward for this, but it is what God has called me to do and I have accepted to follow God's call."

Are we willing to do the same thing? I hope we can pray over this. Really listen and understand how Jesus says no to what his disciples want him to do and says yes to what God calls him to do.

Can we do the same thing in our life? Say no to the ways of the world around us, where the values of Jesus are

so easily disregarded, and say yes to the way of Jesus. Go with him to bring about a complete overhaul of our world. A totally new creation Listen deeply. Pray with Jesus in that quiet place and perhaps each of us will be able to go with him, and we will enter into the work of making the reign of God come into its fullness.

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