NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Keep greed out of your heart

Thomas Gumbleton | Nov. 17, 2011 The Peace Pulpit

As we listen to the lessons today, one of the first things we might notice is how the different books of the Scriptures, the letters of Paul, Matthew, John, Luke and so on were all written at a different time. They bring forth lessons for the people then, but for us, too, that change over the period of time. What I'm thinking of is the second lesson today from St. Paul. That was the earliest of all the Christian Scriptures. It was written around the year 50, and at that point the Christian community was still expecting the return of Jesus at any moment.
{C}

So Paul had to kind of calm them down and assure them that Jesus will return, but we don't know when. Yet the people were still very agitated, upset and concerned. It took a long time for them to begin to realize that the return of Jesus was not imminent. Now 30-some years later when Matthew's Gospel was written, the community of disciples of Jesus has become used to the idea that Jesus is not going to return right away, and we really don't know when it will happen. Now it's 2,000 years later and Jesus has not returned, so we're very comfortable with the idea that the imminent return of Jesus is not right now.

Thirty-third Sunday, Nov. 13, 2011 Time

Proverbs 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31

Psalm 128:1-2, 3, 4-5

1 Thessalonians 5:1-6

Matthew 25:14-30

Full text of the readings [1]

Paul was writing to the Christians to nevertheless, as he said, "Be prepared." Not right now, but we don't know when. When Matthew's Gospel was written, he draws from Jesus' teaching to help the people to understand how we must live in this time in between, the time after Jesus' resurrection and the time when Jesus will come again in the fullness of His glory. How do we live during this period of time? The Gospel parable was provided for those people in Matthew's community and for us, to give us some guidance.

Now we're used to thinking of this parable in a way that we have developed the talents into a metaphor. When Jesus spoke that parable, and told that story, the people only understood talent as money. It was only much later that we began to develop the idea that talents were gifts, and Jesus was teaching us to use our gifts, but if we try to listen to the story the way the first disciples of Jesus would have heard it, it's about something different. What it's really about is the teaching of Jesus concerning greed. Jesus was very strong on that. If you look at Luke's Gospel, in the 12th chapter, Jesus cries out to the people, "Avoid greed in any form."

Greed is something that is destructive of us, so Jesus tells us to avoid it in any form. Then he even tells a short parable there where he tells about someone who had all that he needed and yet decided that I have such abundance, I need to build new barns and store up for the future. Then Jesus says in that story, "You fool. This night your soul is taken from you." He thought he had everything set because he was greedy and had piled up wealth, but all of a sudden, it's meaningless. It's nothing.

In the parable of today, it's another way of Jesus teaching us it's wrong to try to pile up wealth. When we change that idea of the talent into our gifts that we have to develop and use, then it's important to keep on trying to do that, but when we think of it only as money, as the first hearers of Jesus would have, we draw a totally different response. Those people lived in the society where people understood, and the Jewish tradition was that God made the world for all, and not just a few. We need to have enough, but not to pile up riches, not to become

richer and richer.

We need enough, but not more than enough. In the peasant society in which Jesus lived, that was the way people lived when they weren't consumed with greed. So we have to begin to look at ourselves and the world in which we live, and try to see what the message of Jesus is for us. We live in the world where, I think, the idea that God made the world for all and that everyone has a right to a full, human life, and no one has a right to keep beyond their needs when others lack the very basic necessities of life, we live in a world where that idea doesn't seem to be holding anymore.

We live in a world where now we even glorify the wealthiest among us. We draw a list every year of those who are the wealthiest people, so subconsciously at least, I think many of us think, Wouldn't it be great to be on that list of the 400 richest people in the United States? That's so wrong, if you listen to what Jesus says today. Those first two servants were falling into the pattern of greed with the master. The third servant is the one who is really more admirable. He refused to participate in this effort to build up wealth for one person. He buried the talent.

Right away, we have to be sure to recognize that in this parable, the master is not God. Sometimes when we think of it as our talents and gifts, then we think it's God, but no. The master in this parable is one who is a greedy person who wants more and more, and then the honorable slave or servant is one whom we should admire, who tries to subvert the pattern of greed by not participating in that effort for one person to gain more and more wealth. Then we also have to be aware when we stand up against what is the common expectation, and it does seem in our country and world over the last 50 years at least or a bit longer, that the wealth has moved from the poor to the rich in the international, globalized economy.

The poorest countries are poorer now than they were 50 years ago. The richest countries are richer. In our own country, the same thing is happening. To stand up against that takes courage. I think of two people that really did try to preach and live the message of this parable: Oscar Romero in El Salvador. He constantly preached to the rich, "You must share. We can't allow so few to have so much, and so many to have so little." He really preached that Gospel, trying to lift up the poor, to share in the good that God intended for all. He was shot to death because those who have more and are always trying to get more become angry at those who try to defend it.

The other person I think of, someone more recent, is Sr. Dorothy Stang from the United States, who was in Brazil trying to protect the indigenous people whose land was being taken from them by the rich. She, too, was shot to death. When you try to go against what seems to be the accepted, cultural norm for ourselves, getting more and more, you stand out and some people will not like it. In our own country right now, how might we apply the teachings of this parable?

First of all, I think each of us has to look at ourselves. Do we hear Jesus saying to us, "Avoid greed in every form?" or do we find ourselves maybe almost unconsciously trying to get more, trying to store it away, trying to accumulate? Just the attitude we have towards wealth is very important. Do we think of it as something that God gave for all and that we don't have a right to far more than we need if others lack the barest necessities? What is our attitude? Then what would we change? I saw in your bulletin today that there is an insert for the Campaign for Human Development.

That's a way of giving some of our wealth to enable other people to become more self-sufficient, enable other people to earn enough to survive and live. Are we looking to really look into that and do something, to give of ourselves for that? Even beyond that, in our public policy, in that insert in the bulletin, it points out that there are over 43 billion people in our country that are living in poverty and are not able to be removed from poverty or climb out of poverty, but our public policies can do something to make it more possible and make it impossible.

That's 16 percent of our people, that 43 million. Some of the proposals that are being put forth in our Congress

right now for trying to eliminate our deficits and balance our budgets would devastate the poor. If we took away the earned income tax credit, which many people want to do, that would increase the number of poor people in our country to 18 percent. If we took away the food stamp program, which enables people to survive if they are unable to get work and earn enough, that would increase the poor people in our country to 17.7 percent. So it's very important what we decide to do as a people.

If we're going to work against the greed that can seep into our own heart and spirit, then we have to try and find the ways through our individual actions and through our public policy to share what God has given for all and not for a few. Perhaps besides the people I suggested already as our models, we can look to the woman who is praised in our first lesson today in the Book of Proverbs. She is strong and dignified, and looks with confidence to the future. She speaks wisely and her words are kind. She keeps an eye on the conduct of her household and is never idle.

Her sons rise up and call her blessed. Her husband sings her praises because besides being so good to them, she reaches out her hand to the helpless and gives to the poor. This is one that God is praising for having that spirit of generosity and sharing, and not a spirit of greed. This is the one that I hope we will try to imitate as we listen deeply to God's Word today.

[Homily given at Blessed Sacrament Parish, Midland, Mich.]

Source URL (retrieved on *12/11/2013 - 01:38*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/peace-pulpit/keep-greed-out-your-heart

Links:
[1] http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/111311.cfm