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We come to know and trust God through our faith

Thomas Gumbleton | Oct. 10, 2013 The Peace Pulpit

I think all of us probably feel that Gospel lesson is a bit harsh where Jesus says, "You're only servants; don't expect anything. You have just done what you're supposed to do." But if we listen carefully to all the lessons today, I think we will put that in its proper context and understand what Jesus is trying to remind us of, because these lessons today are about faith. Faith -- that virtue that we call one of the primary virtues: faith, hope and love -- believing, trusting, faith.

Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
Habakkuk 1:2-3; 2:2-4
Psalms 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9
2 Timothy 1:6-8, 13-14
Luke 17:5-10
Full text of the readings [1]

Each of the lessons shows us a little bit different way about faith. See, I think that first lesson is pretty obvious. The chosen people are living in the midst of extraordinary turmoil. There's violence and suffering everywhere. In fact, it's not much different from what we observe going on in the Middle East right now -- with the killing, the violence, the destruction of people's lives, going into exile everywhere -- and not only there, but other parts of the world, too.

In the midst of that turmoil, the prophet says to the people two things. First of all, he says, "Look again; God is at work in the world, so stir up that vision. It's there; it's very plain, even." The prophet says, "Write down the vision and scribe it on tables so it can be easily read. This is a vision for an appointed time. It will not fail, but will be fulfilled in due time. If it does delay, wait for it, for it will come and will not be deterred." So the first thing is that we must work within ourselves to bring forth the vision of what God intends. Even in the midst of all suffering, turmoil, violence, killing, God has a vision for us.

Then finally, that prophet says to the people, "The just person -- the one who is justified in the sight of God, who is holy in the sight of God -- is the person who believes. The just person -- the one relating to God -- is a believing person." The Gospel lesson isn't quite as clear of a connection of why the disciples are saying, "Jesus, increase our faith."

Well, something had happened just before this part of Luke's Gospel where Jesus had said to the disciples, "Listen carefully; if your brother or sister offends you, tell them, and if he is sorry, forgive that person. Even if the person offends you seven times in one day, but seven times says to you, 'I'm sorry,' forgive that person."

See, it's that demand of Jesus to always be reaching out in love and forgiveness -- a very difficult command, and so it's then that the disciples say to Jesus, "Increase our faith. Maybe we want to try to do what you're asking of us, but we don't think it's possible. How could we forgive time after time after time and try to re-enact a relationship of love with someone who has offended us, hurt us in a very deep way?" The disciples realize they need help, so they ask Jesus for faith.

It's not right at this part of Luke's Gospel, but Luke also had provided a vision for the disciples earlier, right at the beginning of his public life. Jesus had provided a vision of what could be, what will be, what God intends. It was when he went to the synagogue in Nazareth after his time in the desert and he read from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

It's a passage that we're all familiar with, I'm sure, where Jesus reads the prophet says, "The spirit of God is upon me. God sends me to proclaim good news to the poor, to give the blind new sight, heal the broken-hearted, set the downtrodden free. Proclaim God's year of jubilee -- the time of complete fulfillment where everyone

begins to live a full human life -- is brought to fulfillment." That's the vision of Jesus.

Here in the Gospel, it isn't like it was in the first lesson. We're being told, "Hold up that vision; don't forget it," but that's what we must do: We must hold the vision before us. God is at work bringing about the reign of God that Jesus has just described, but it also, in this case, depends on faith. The disciples realize that -- "Increase our faith" -- but now, here is where we have to be really clear about: What do we mean by faith?

In that Gospel lesson, Jesus goes on, needing to talk about the servant who's done everything he's been told to do. He lives according to the rules, and he observes all the least even of the commandments, but it's always in a form of obeying rules, of doing what you're supposed to do; it's not really faith. Faith is something very different. Faith isn't giving a cent to doctrines, which we do when we proclaim the creed. We say, "I believe this doctrine, this doctrine, this doctrine," and so on, but here, what we're talking about is something much more profound, much deeper -- it's all about our relationship with God.

In the prayer that opens a wedding Mass, we pray for the couple who are being married that they will be able to live out what is the mystery of marriage, the symbol of the love of Jesus for his community -- total love. The prayer says, "With faith in you (that is, faith in God), and in each other, we pledge our trust today, and then may God enable us to live out this vocation of love."

But it's "pledge our faith; pledge our trust." See, what two people getting married have to do is believe in each other, but that doesn't mean believing doctrines about each other. It means believing in the person, relating to the person, and trusting; coming to know that person -- deeply trusting.

See, and that's what our faith with God is; our faith in God is that we come to know God deeply and we trust God -- God living within our hearts, within our spirit -- and we try to build up that relationship with God. When we really are alive with God -- God alive within us -- then that's when we have faith, and that's when we can begin to hold on to the vision. Yes, God is going to bring peace and fulfillment of life for everyone. The reign of God is beginning to happen and it will come to its fulfillment, and all of us begin to interact with God in that deep relationship of faith.

Then again, not giving belief to doctrines, but rather deepening our relationship with God, entering into a deep communion with God -- that's faith. Certainly, we must pray like the disciples: "Increase our faith. Enable us to deepen that relationship with God so that we can then begin to live according to the way of the Gospel: forgive -- forgive time after time; love -- be the first to reach out in love." We must try to do that, but live according to all the ways so Jesus, not fulfilling every command out of duty, but because God has first loved us; now we love God. That's what faith is.

So as we struggle with our own difficulties in life -- whatever is happening in our lives that may be causing suffering or hurt or pain -- and when we look in the world around us and we see the violence and the killing that goes on, and the hate and all of the terrible things, we must have the vision like how Habakkuk said to those chosen people, like Jesus says to the disciples: believe.

Perhaps most of all then today, as we try to join with the disciples and say, "Increase our faith," we must do what Paul says to Timothy: "Each of us, hands were laid on us, water was poured over us, so that God's life could come to fulfillment within us." Paul says, and says to us this morning: "I invite you to fan into a flame the gift of faith God gave to you through the laying on of my hands. For God did not confer on us the spirit of bashfulness, but of strength and love, and it's that which we must stir up within us -- that flame of faith, which is relationship with God, which is love."

When we make that begin to happen -- or rather, really, it's God who makes it happen through us or in us -- then we are people who are living by faith, and Jesus, working through us, will bring the vision to fulfillment.

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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