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In conversion, God seeks us

Thomas Gumbleton | Nov. 7, 2013 The Peace Pulpit

I'm sure we remember that we have been making this journey with Jerusalem over these past weeks, throughout the summer and now through the fall, and Jesus has been trying to show us what happens in a dramatic way to Zacchaeus in today's Gospel. Jesus has been calling us to conversion. At the very beginning of his public life in Mark's Gospel, Jesus says, "The reign of God is at hand. Change your lives." In other words, be converted -- change -- and today, we have a very dramatic example of such a conversion.

You may wonder: Why did the people grumble when Jesus went to the house of Zacchaeus? Well, he was what they would think of -- and in many ways, it's true -- a public sinner. He was the chief tax collector, which meant he worked for the Roman authorities, the occupying power. The people, the Jews for the most part, hated these Romans, who occupied their land and were very harsh and cruel.

Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

Wisdom 11:22-12:2

Psalms 145:1-2, 8-9, 10-11, 13, 14

2 Thessalonians 1:11-2:2

Luke 19:1-10

Full text of the readings [1]

Zacchaeus was one who collected the taxes for them. Not only, like many of the tax collectors, he was the chief, and that meant he probably got a little bit of payoff from the others who worked for him because they all extorted more than they had a right to, but then they could keep the rest. So these tax collectors were really not a very attractive group of people. They were, for all practical purposes, public sinners.

So what happens? Zacchaeus is in the tree watching for Jesus, and when Jesus comes along, Jesus has been looking for him ... because he looks up at Zacchaeus and says, "Come down. Today, I'm going to visit your house, dwell with you," and this astounded the people.

But Zacchaeus underwent a profound conversion; this one who was a cheater and extorted money unjustly from the people, he said, "I now give half of my possessions away." Think of that -- half of your possessions to give away in one dramatic gift. That's really asking a lot for someone who is being converted, but it's what Jesus is drawing us to: the spirit of poverty, not to have way more than we need.

Also, Zacchaeus says, "I will pay back anyone I have cheated four times," and so he's really making up for his failures. He has undergone a profound conversion, and I'm sure that this Gospel lesson is given to us so that we can begin to reflect [on] what kind of conversion must I undergo, and how can I make that happen? How much of my goods am I called to share with others?

Probably none of us would dramatically give away half of what we have, but perhaps we need to break a little bit away from the culture of consumption in which we live and be more willing to share with others for the common good so that all our brothers and sisters would share the good things that God has made for all.

Surely we need to think about that kind of conversion and to be totally honest in all that we do, always making sure that we live uprightly and justly. We're being called to conversion, surely, and this Gospel lesson gives us that dramatic example of what can happen when we really pursue this effort to follow the Gospel to be converted -- to enter into the reign of God, which is at hand. The first thing I think that is necessary is something that we learn from the Book of Wisdom this morning.

That writer, whoever he was so many hundreds and hundreds of years ago, really hits upon a very important thing: "The entire world," the writer says, "lies before you, speaking to God. Although it's a drop of morning dew falling on the ground in the sight of God, yet to us all of creation is extraordinary, magnificent. And God," the writer says, "you are almighty, and yet you are merciful. But what's most important, you love everything that you have made and that you hate nothing that you have made, or you would not have formed it."

What the writer's reminding us is that every one of us -- and all of creation -- has been drawn forth out of nothing only because of God's love. It's the love of God that brings us into being. ... See, the love of God continues to support us, to keep us in existence, to give us the gift.

Every gift that we have is from God, and that, I think, is the first step to genuine conversion: to realize that whatever we have -- material goods, gifts of character, spirit -- whatever we have comes from God, and so, in a sense, it's not really ours. God just shares God's love with us and then expects us to reach out in love to others.

That's why we need to be converted, or what will help us to be converted is to understand that whatever we have is given to us by God as gift. We haven't earned it; we could not earn it. We will never earn a place in heaven; it's always God's gift. So if we can begin to really draw that into our understanding of who we are and where we come from and what God has done for us, perhaps we will be converted and able to share more generously what his gift to us.

But then the second thing that I think helps to bring about conversion is to understand that in a way, it's not that we're looking for God -- God is looking for us. God is trying to draw us closer to God. Jesus was already looking for Zacchaeus before Zacchaeus ever climbed that tree. As Jesus comes along, he looks up and spots Zacchaeus because he's looking for him. He's trying to draw him in, and that same Jesus is searching out each one of us, drawing us closer to himself and through him, to God.

So if we respond to this Jesus who is looking for us by trying to know him better through our Scriptures -- listening every Sunday carefully to what Jesus does and says and how he acts and understand that Jesus is drawing us to be more like him -- it will begin to happen. We'll begin to change; we'll begin to be converted in the way that God loves us and draws us to that conversion.

Then we can remember too, finally, that we have people like Paul, who wrote to the church of Thessalonica, praying for us: "This is why we constantly pray for you. May God make you worthy of the calling God has given to you." Paul and all the saints in heaven are praying for us; our brothers and sisters pray for us. We pray for one another that every one of us may be worthy of the call Jesus has given us to change our lives and enter into the reign of God. Begin to do that today, and make it the quest of the rest of our lives.

[Homily given at St. Hilary, 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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