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When will we learn the way of Jesus and follow it?

Thomas Gumbleton | Aug. 23, 2012 The Peace Pulpit

In one of his letters, St. Paul, in reflecting about his own mortality and the possibility that he would soon die, proclaimed his belief that he would never really die. He said, "I live now, no longer I, but Christ who lives in me." These are words that I hope we will take to heart and make our own, especially as we reflect on these scripture lessons of today, and that we will leave this church understanding that each of us lives now, no longer I but Jesus living in me, now and forever.

In order for us to come to this strong conviction, it's important that we do reflect in today's lessons. I think it's also very important as you reflect on the Gospel and the other two lessons of today that we remind ourselves of the whole contrast of this long discourse that Jesus has been proclaiming in the Gospel of John that we've listened to over the last three Sundays. Remember, it happened when Jesus had been apart with the people in the desert place.

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Proverbs 9:1-6
Psalms 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7
Ephesians 5:15-20
John 6:51-58
Full text of the readings [1]

They had spent long hours with him and they were hungry. The disciples were ready to send them home to go back and get what they needed on their own. Jesus said, "No. We must take care of them. You have to serve them. Feed them." Then you remember he took those five loaves and two fish and blessed them, broke them and the disciples distributed them to over 5,000 people. It was an extraordinary miracle, or as John called it, a sign.

In John's Gospel, in fact, there are seven big signs. We think of them as miracles, but John always talks about them as signs. The last of them was the resurrection of Jesus, that sign of everlasting and new life. At the end of that Gospel of John, after he has recorded all of these signs, he says, "There are many other signs that Jesus gave in the presence of His disciples, but they are not recorded in this book. These are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and by believing, you will have life through his name."

So these signs that we've been hearing about over the last four Sundays are signs that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Once we grasp that and really take it to heart, we will change our lives. This becomes very clear as we listen to what Jesus has been preaching to us these last three Sundays, and especially today, starting with the words that he said at the beginning of today's passage. "I am the living bread come down from heaven. I am the living bread, not as your ancestors ate manna in the desert and died. This bread that I am and that I give to you is life for everlasting."

In the traditions of the Jewish people from whom Jesus came and the line of teaching that he would take, bread, and the manna in the desert is a form of bread, was also thought of as the teaching, the Torah. The Torah was for the chosen people. That is the full law of God. The Torah was, for the chosen people, bread that would nourish them, enlighten them and strengthen them. Jesus says, "I am the living bread. I am the one who can enlighten, teach, instruct and guide. I am the teacher."

Today, in our spiritual lessons, we are provided with a passage in the first lesson today about Jesus as wisdom.

God is the fullness of wisdom, all learning, all knowledge, but knowledge that becomes really wisdom. This is God. God in that lesson is personified as a woman who has this marvelous banquet and invites all of us to come. We see that wisdom, take it in and live by it, the wisdom of God. That's a very important part of what we need to learn from today's lesson, Jesus saying, "I am the bread of life. I am wisdom, and I am the wisdom by which all of us are to guide our lives."

Have you ever thought much about what the wisdom of God is? I think all of us have some sense of human wisdom, but the wisdom of God is beyond. It transcends human wisdom. "My ways are not your ways. My thoughts are not your thoughts." Those are words that Isaiah proclaimed. "As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high and distant are my words, my thoughts above your thoughts."

St. Paul, in writing to the first Christian community at Corinth, spells this out, what is God's wisdom and how different it is from our human wisdom. Paul says, in writing to the church at Corinth, "Jesus did not send me to baptize. No, Jesus sent me to proclaim the good news," the good news, the message of God, and you cannot proclaim that in terms of human wisdom. Why? It's because God's ways are not our ways. God's thoughts are not our thoughts.

Human wisdom is far short of divine wisdom. Paul says, "I must proclaim God's wisdom. That's why I preach a crucified Christ. Of the crucified Christ I preach," one who seems to have totally failed ... and yet, as Paul says about Jesus and his dying, to the Jews, it was a scandal. They could not accept a God who was powerless, who was humiliated. To them, it was a scandal.

To the Greeks, the so-called wise people, it was foolishness to let yourself be put to death, forbid anyone to use violence to defend you, to give up your power. That's foolishness, but then Paul changed that passage by telling us, "God's weakness is stronger than human strength, and God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom." What seems to be foolishness from our point of view is God's divine wisdom, wiser than human wisdom and stronger than human strength because God's wisdom is love.

Through his death, suffering and execution on the cross, Jesus continues to love and pour forth love upon this world, and that's what will change this world, this wisdom of God, giving up power, violence, wealth and prestige, those things that we think are so important. The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, giving yourself over to death and even loving those putting you to death. Don't just love those who love you. Love your enemy.

That's what Jesus is doing on the cross: pouring forth his love on us, on all the universe. That's divine wisdom, and Jesus, as the teacher, the living bread, wants us to learn that wisdom. So that's why we have wisdom in our first lesson today, inviting us to come to this banquet and learn the wisdom of God. Then, as Jesus says in today's lesson, not only is he the living bread, the teacher, but Jesus also lives in us.

As Paul puts it, "I live, no longer I, but Jesus lives in me." Jesus acts through us. If we really become alive with Jesus, we will follow his wisdom and we will act according to his ways, which means that we will first of all follow that example of Jesus there in the desert. We will reach out to the poor and the hungry, feed them, nurture them and nourish them. What will that mean, if Jesus is alive in me and I'm following his way?

It certainly means -- and I take this out of the newspaper from the other day -- we have an agriculture bill before our Congress that will provide grossly generous subsidies for the agriculture industry. It will make the agriculture businesses richer and richer, but how do they do it? They do it by cutting a staggering $16.5 billion dollars over the next decade from programs that serve the poor, cutting down on food stamps, where people already only get $90 a month.

They would take away food assistance at school, taking away school meals for 280,000 children if that bill is

signed and promulgated in our country. That's not the way of Jesus, feeding the poor in the desert, feeding the hungry. If we really are aligned with Jesus, we will not let things like that happen. We will work to change so that the poor are blessed, as Jesus says in the Gospel of Matthew, "Blessed are the poor. Theirs is the reign of God."

That only happens if we make those blessings come to the poor because Jesus lives in us and acts through us. The other way, of course, that we very clearly can follow the way of Jesus, to have that living bread become so much a part of us that we act according to his ways is to give up violence, to give up war. When will we ever learn? We've been at war in Iraq since 1991. Yes, we finally withdrew our troops and said we've left behind a democratic nation, but it's a nation torn apart, filled with violence.

It's not at peace, and what's really threatening to us right now, when we pulled our troops and supposedly we left behind a democratic nation? They are democratic, but making their own decisions, so now they're aligning with Iran, and we're desperately afraid of Iran. We're putting sanctions against them to destroy that nation. Now, our democratic friend is partnered with Iran, and soon, if Israel has its way, we will be bombing Iran, perhaps opening up a whole new war.

When will we ever learn the way of Jesus and follow it? Jesus is the living bread come down from heaven to teach us and give us his life. "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has everlasting life." We have that gift. Now we must act upon it. Follow the way of Jesus, the wisdom of Jesus and the love of Jesus. Through our efforts, having Jesus act through us, finally we might bring the wisdom of Jesus to bear on our everyday life and in our world, and bring the love and the peace of God, the love and peace of Jesus ever deeper in our own hearts, and we will be spreading it throughout the world in which we live.

[Homily given at St. Leo Church, Detroit. 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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