

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Jul. 31, 2008 The Peace Pulpit

As I mentioned in introducing the gospel, this is the third Sunday that we have been listening to parables by Jesus, and all of them, seven in total, are connected with the kingdom of heaven. Jesus wants us to understand what he means by the kingdom of heaven. Perhaps you reviewed this last week or the week before, but it's important to do it once more, to review what Jesus meant when he said "The kingdom of heaven."

I think, many times, we would almost automatically or immediately think of the kingdom of heaven as a place where we'll all go at some point. That's why, in some religious traditions, there's a great deal of emphasis on being saved. "I have to be saved. Jesus saves me, so then I'll be qualified enter into the kingdom of heaven," but that really isn't what Jesus is speaking about. That's why it's so important to review these parables and to listen to them carefully.

When Jesus talks about the kingdom of heaven, he's really talking about what we call the reign of God, or the rule of God -- what Jesus spoke about at the very beginning of his public life. It's recorded best of all in Mark's Gospel, where Jesus comes on the scene and says, "The reign of God is at hand."

The reign of God is at hand! The reign of God is ready to break out! What does he mean by that? He means the rule of God's love -- God's dynamic, powerful, transforming love -- it's here!

That's what Jesus says. That reign of God is here.

So it's not a place, it's not something we earn; it's God's love we enter into.

That means, for Jesus, that everything in all of creation, when the reign of God happens fully, will be captured or brought forth into fullness, because God's love is so transforming and so powerful. All of us will be made into full human persons. Everyone in the whole of the universe and for all time will come into that fullness of life that Jesus and God want for every one of us. Even all of creation will enter into a fullness, a wholeness.

But if we look at the world around us, obviously the reign of God is not very close. It hasn't happened, certainly not in its fullness.

All you have to do is listen to the news or read the newspaper any day and you find out there are wars going on in many places in the world, there's violence, there's killing, there are people put into slavery, there are people

being deprived of food and water. In fact, the vast majority of the people on the planet live very incomplete lives. We live in desperation, and some even in absolute poverty.

The reign of God hasn't happened.

Or if we look at the world itself, what are we doing to it? We're not treating it as God would treat it, with love; we're destroying the world in which we live because of our overconsumption, of wanting too much, so we are careless about how we use the earth, and we're destroying it. That's against the reign of God.

The reign of God is this rule of God's love, where everything is brought forth into fullness -- every creature, every person. If we listen to the parables that Jesus has been teaching us, he's trying to help us understand what the reign of God is and how it will happen.

If we look at the third parable today, one of the things that becomes very clear -- it's much like one of the parables last week where Jesus spoke about the reign of God being like a field where a farmer has planted good seed, but then an enemy comes and puts in bad seed and so on. The owner's workmen say "Let's root out those weeds," and the farmer says, "No, let them grow together. Today the fish in the net -- we would want to throw them away right away and Jesus says, "No, let them come together," in the reign of God, as the transforming power of God's love is happening. Those bad fish become good fish. The bad weeds become good fruit, wheat.

See, God can transform so it's not up to us to decide who can be part of this community and who can't, or who can be part of the world in which we live and who can't. The reign of God, as we try to make it happen within our church, we want it to be totally inclusive, so we don't screen out people on any basis. No, we want to be a community, a church, which is making the reign of God happen, so everyone is welcome -- rich or poor, black or white, no matter what your sexual orientation is, no matter what your nationality is, where you come from -- we're all part of God's people.

In the reign of God, when it's happening, we draw everybody together and we don't push people away. That hasn't always been true of the church in which we live throughout our world, but we have to try to make it that way. That's what Jesus is telling us through that parable.

The other two parables today both kind of have the same message. The reign of God is so important and it's so valuable that we should let everything else go.

You find a treasure in a field, so you sell all that you have to buy that field so you have that treasure. That's the reign of God, so our priorities are that we work only to make the reign of God happen. Or the merchant who's looking for the fine pearl and finds it, he gives up everything else and buys that one pearl. This is how we ought to be in our attitude toward the reign of God. We want to make it happen.

We want it to be the most important thing in our lives that we, ourselves, each of us, comes under the rule of God's love -- nothing else but the rule of God's love -- and that we try to draw everybody into that rule of love. So we share what we have so that everybody has a chance for a full life. We draw people in, we don't push them

away. We make our community very diverse and complete. If we really make the reign of God our priority, we will act according to God's way of love, and only according to God's way of love.

I think that sometimes when we hear Jesus present this to us and invite us to enter into the reign of God, we can see immediately that it's something very good. Why wouldn't we want to become part of it, drawing in everyone else and trying to make it happen in its fullness? Well, there is a reason, of course. When Jesus first proclaimed, as you go back and read it in Mark's Gospel, "The reign of God is at hand," he says it's here. All of us can enter into it, but Jesus said, "Change your lives."

You don't enter into the reign of God, and you will not be helping to make the reign of God come into its fullness, unless you begin to live according to the values of the reign of God. I noticed in the bulletin today, the hymn for the Offertory is so appropriate. It's the beatitudes. Those are the values that we have to try to live by if we're going to enter into the reign of God.

If we're going to make the reign of God our number-one priority, our only priority, then we have to try to be simple in our lives, in the way we live, not accumulating way more than we need. "Blessed are the poor." "Blessed are the gentle." We have to be ready to reach out, to forgive. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice's sake." We work to make justice happen in our world. "Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are those who are single-hearted," integrity.

This is the way we have to live if we want to enter into the reign of God. It is really ready to happen, the reign of God, where everything could be transformed -- in my personal life, in the community in which we live, in our city, in our world -- we would be willing to live according to those values and change our lives, give up violence, give up hatred and vindictiveness and change so that we become like Jesus, living according to the values that he proclaims.

The other two lessons today will help us perhaps, especially the first lesson. Solomon asked God when he was given the opportunity, "What do you want?" He said, "An understanding heart, wisdom and love." So we must pray for that, that God will give each of us wisdom and the ability to love and to be loved, and that will be the beginning then, of how we enter into the reign of God.

And as we do this, what St. Paul tells us today will begin to happen and we'll realize how true it is, that everyone who lives according to the spirit of God, according to the way of Jesus, where everything works together for good. Everything works together for good when we live according to God's way and enter into the reign of God.

So we pray today that we will have the wisdom, the understanding heart, to know where we have to change in order to enter into that reign of God and help to transform our world into the fullness of God's reign.

[Bishop Gumbleton preached this homily at St. Leo Parish, the Detroit parish he served as pastor from 1983 to 2007.]

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