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Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

As always when we celebrate our liturgy of the word, we try to listen deeply to what God is speaking to us. We must try to do it within the context of what is happening within our lives. Today, of course, we know, and all of us are very profoundly aware, that the biggest thing happening in our life right now, happening within our country, is the campaign to determine who will be our leaders for the next four years.

We're in the midst of a political campaign, so it's important that we listen to God's word in that context. The scriptures today, I think, are very appropriate for this in a few ways. First of all, because if we are listening carefully, we'll discover that God's word must always be listened to within the context in which God proclaims that word. We have to be very careful not to take a passage of scripture and say, "This proves a certain thing," and then that's it.

No, scripture is much more complicated than that. We have to listen carefully to be sure we don't distort God's word and try to impose upon another what we think God is saying. We have to always try to listen to what God is really saying.

In today's gospel lesson, when we hear Jesus say to the disciples -- and he's talking to all the disciples, not to the apostles, that special group, but all the disciples -- Jesus says to them, "Whatever you bind on earth is bound in heaven. Whatever you loose on earth is loosed in heaven." Do you remember just a few weeks ago when Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do people say I am?" You remember, some said "John the

Baptist" others said "Jeremiah." One of the prophets, Peter, says, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus said to Peter, "Yes, Peter, and you are the rock upon which I build my church." And then he says, "And whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven. Whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

That passage is sometimes taken out of the larger gospel context. That was in Chapter 16. Today, in Chapter 20, Jesus is saying the same thing to the whole group of disciples. Sometimes people took that other passage without listening to this passage. They began, and it didn't happen until about the fourth century, to interpret that Peter then, was given the sole authority to bind and to loose, and we ended up with a papacy where everything is centralized into one person, the pope.

That isn't the way it really was. As we see in Chapter 18, two chapters later, Jesus is speaking to all the church. We have to be very careful and we have to live with his intention. Yes, the role of Peter, the role of the Pope is very important, but the whole community is intentioned with that role of the Pope. It's a whole community that has to listen to God's word, proclaim God's word, bind and loose.

We can't so easily take one passage and say, "That's it." This is true of all the scriptures. We have to always listen, because very often there is a context and that gives a different nuance to what we're hearing God say.

Another example today is where Jesus says to that assembled group of disciples that 'if the person won't listen to the church, push him away.' We have developed, in Christian churches sometimes, what is called shunning, where a person is totally rejected, pushed out of the community, ignored, condemned, sent away.

But if we listen to this passage that we hear today, it was in the framework where Jesus puts it. Just before today's passage, we had the beautiful parable that Jesus tells about the one sheep that is lost. There's a whole flock of sheep. One is lost and Jesus says, 'God goes after that one who is lost. You don't push that sheep away and neglect, and ignore, and condemn. You go and find the sheep and bring it back.' After this passage, what you'll hear next Sunday is the time when Peter says, "How many times do I have to forgive somebody -- seven times?" "No, no, seven times seven times, without limit."

Even though we make judgments at times and we say as a community, "This is wrong," we never push somebody away and leave that person abandoned.

How easily this can happen. It was brought out with the experience of a person, a very well known leader in political life. He was the legal counsel under President Reagan and under the first President George Bush.

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His name is Douglas Kmiec and recently he spoke about the views of two of our candidates, Senator

[Barack] Obama and Senator [Joseph] Biden. He says, "In my view, [they] seek to fulfill the call by Pope John Paul II, in the encyclical 'Evangelium Vitae,'" the gospel of light, "to 'ensure proper support for families and motherhood.' It cannot possibly contravene Catholic doctrine to improve the respect for life by paying better attention to the social and economic conditions of women, which correlate strongly with the number of abortions." He's against abortion, but he says there's a way you can prevent abortions without eliminating choice.

What happened? This is a question and answer with the report. "You have been fiercely attacked by some Catholic abortion opponents, in one instance, barred from receiving communion. How do you feel about that?" He was pushed away, they tried to shun him.

"To be a subject of an angry homily at Mass and excoriated as giving scandal for endorsing Senator Obama and then to be denied Communion for that 'offense' was the most humiliating experience of my life."

You see, he came to communion and the Priest said, "No!" -- turned him away.

"To be separated in that public manner from the receipt of the Eucharist, to be effectively shunned or separated from the body of Christ, has left, I very much regret to say, a permanent spiritual scar. "Thankfully it has also given me a new appreciation for the significance of the sacrament in my daily worship.

Now, the priest later sent me an apology and, of course, I've accepted it. Nevertheless, I remain deeply troubled that other church leaders not fall into similar traps. That would do untold damage to the church, within the context of U.S. democracy."

That's what we have to be very careful of. We can think that my position is absolutely right and so we shun other people, deny them Holy Communion. That would not be the way of Jesus, really, would it? If you put what Jesus says in today's gospel lesson within the framework of when he said it -- going after the lost sheep, bringing that person back -- don't excommunicate; communicate. Interact, enter into dialogue, conversation, and keep the community together.

During this campaign, as it goes on we're going to have to be very careful, I'm sure, that we don't allow this kind of division to rise up among us, where some say, "God said this, therefore, you must go." No, we can't be that way. We have to be the way Jesus was.

Yes, standing up for the truth, but always being open to hearing new insights as others also listen to God's word to hear God's truth.

The lesson from the gospels is reinforced for us today by listening to what happened to the prophet Ezekiel. God said to that prophet, "Yes, you must preach. You must preach, even if they don't listen. It will be up to me to take care of that. You simply preach."

We as a community have to keep on taking that responsibility that we say God's word. We listen deeply to God's word. Then we say that word within the framework of our larger community, within the context of the presidential campaign. We always say that word in a way that others can hear the word if possible. If they don't, that's up to God to take care of them -- not up to us.

That's what God says to Ezekiel, "You do what you're suppose to do and I will do what I do." We too, take up this responsibility of proclaiming God's word, not just by quoting the scriptures, but by living it.

That means most of all, living it according to the way that Paul instructs us today. Yes, there is, Paul mentions, the law of the covenant, 613 laws, and there are the Commandments. All of that is summed up in one law: "Love one another." Love one another without limit.

Love sums up the whole law and so we, as the witnesses of Jesus, the community of his disciples, we carry his word into our world and we do it by listening deeply to what God speaks to us. But then, most of all, by trying to live according to the way of Jesus, which is the way of love.

This is how we will build up our community and be truly the watchman that Ezekiel says God calls us to be, that we will be watching that God's word is proclaimed, and listened to, and followed. That will happen most of all if we proclaim that word by living the one law that sums up everything: "Love your neighbor as you love yourself."

[Bishop Gumbleton preached this homily at the Church of the Madonna in Detroit, Mich.]

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