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Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

I think all of us have become accustomed to speaking about the Gospel, which we listen to each week, and read ourselves during the week, as the "good news." It's news -- something new and important -- but good news. Then we come to a parable like the one today and we wonder, "How can it be such good news?" Because instinctively, I think every one of us feels something is violated. Here these people worked one hour; others had worked the whole day. They mentioned the burden of the work and the heat, they put up with all of that and they get the same thing. I think most of us feel there's something wrong there.

Well, it is really good news if we understand it adequately, but we have to understand it with the background of what Isaiah says to us today, God speaking: "My thoughts and not your thoughts. My ways are not your ways," says God, "for as the heavens are above the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts." See, there's a huge difference -- one that is almost impossible for us to grasp, really, between our ways and God's ways. And if we try to understand Jesus according to our ways, we'll never hear the Gospel as good news.

Matthew puts this parable in the Gospel, because he was in a community where most of the members had been Jews converted to become followers of Jesus. Many of them wondered, in fact were trying to insist, that if you're going to be a Christian, that's OK, but you can't give up the covenant that God made with the chosen people and the laws of the covenant that were given on the Mount of Sinai, those so many hundreds of years before.

They thought these newcomers were sort of like those workers in the vineyard that come at the tail end,

and they enter into the reign of God just like we do, and we've borne the burden of the heat of the day because we've been faithful to God for all these hundreds and hundreds of years. We observe circumcision. We observe the 613 laws that have been given to us. So much more is demanded of us. These others come at the last minute and supposedly they're as fully disciples as we are.

So Matthew is trying to get across a point to the people in his community, but it is a very important point for all of us too, because somehow, I think, most of us have a sense that we earn what God gives to us. "We follow the rules, we're here at church on Sunday. Lots of people aren't -- are they going to be blessed by God too?" We think that somehow we're earning God's love.

If we go back to that passage from Isaiah, just before the part that we heard today, God declares, "Come here, all you who are thirsty! Come to the water. All who have no money, come. Yes, without money, at no cost, buy and drink wine and milk."

See, everything is free from God; we don't earn it, although often I'm convinced, we think we earn it. There's part of a letter that John wrote to the first Christian communities that I think is very important to think about at this point. John is saying to the first Christians: "My dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God, and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. And how did the love of God appear among us? God sent God's only son into the world, and this is love. Not that we loved God, but that God first loved us."

Everything is God's gift. Our whole universe, loved into being by God. Every one of us, loved into existence by God.

Everything we have is gifts, and yet we still somehow think we've earned what God gives to us and that is so wrong. It's all a gift.

Just before the passage of today's gospel, there's another incident that I think all of us remember very well because it's so striking. It's where Matthew describes a young man who comes up to Jesus and says, "Good master, what work must I do to earn eternal life?" Jesus challenges him, first of all, and says, "Why do you talk to me about what is good? Only God is good. But if you want to enter life, keep the commandments."

The young man says, "Which commandment?" Jesus responds, "Do not kill. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not bear false witness. Honor your father and your mother. Love your neighbor as yourself." Then the young man says, "I've kept all of these commandments. What is lacking?" Then Jesus answers, "If you wish to be perfect, go sell all that you possess and give the money to the poor, and you will become the owner of a treasure in heaven. Then come back and follow me."

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Jesus is telling this young man, and telling us today, if we really want to follow Jesus, then we have to make a dramatic change in our life, a reversal, a change in thinking first of all, whereby we understand that God first loved us and that everything after that is a gift to us. We never earn anything from God, but if we respond to that gift of God's love, then we enter into the reign of God.

Remember, Jesus tells this parable today because he wants us to understand "What is the reign of God like?"

The reign of God isn't a place where God is. It's that realm where all of us live together under God and within God's overwhelming love. We enter into that realm of God, or reign of God, and we live differently. We begin to live as God lived through Jesus. God so loved the world that God sent Jesus into the world, not to buy back anything from us, but simply to pour forth love upon us, to demonstrate how God loves without limit, without condition, and then call us to try to live the same way.

In our opening prayer today, we asked God, "Guide us as you guide all creation according to your law of love. So may we come to love one another and therefore, come to perfection in the fullness of light you have prepared for us." So this week, I hope each of us will try to find, first of all, a deeper awareness of how much God loves us and how God first loved us, and then respond to that love of God as we pray, "Guide us according to your law of love."

And then begin to reach out in a much more generous and loving way to one another, not always trying to measure "I give this because I received that, but I'm just trying to be like God. I love without limit, without condition, not counting the cost." This is to enter into the reign of God, to follow the way of Jesus: "Let go of everything, come follow me in the way of love."

[Bishop Gumbleton preached this homily at St. Hilary Parish, Detroit, Mich.]

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