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Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

We should remember that Jesus has confronted the Jewish leaders because he had come to Jerusalem, came into the temple and drove out the money changers and so on, and they demanded to know by what authority he did these things. So last Sunday and this Sunday, we hear Jesus entering into kind of a confrontation with these chosen leaders. At this point, he's telling them a parable. When we try to listen to today's scripture lessons, I think we'll find that there are two very clear directions in which the lessons take us.

The one is a reflection about leaders, authority people, those Pharisees and Scribes -- the leaders of God's chosen people in the time of Jesus, or today, leaders of our own church community. How do we relate to these leaders? Jesus shows us. And then the other direction that the readings take us is to help us to enter into a very profound understanding of the amazing love of God, for God's people, for every one of us. But we only will be drawn into this kind of reflection if we remind ourselves again, of the context within which Jesus tells this parable.

As I mentioned before I read the gospel, Jesus had come into Jerusalem (this is the last week of his life), he'd gone into the temple, he'd found money changers and people selling animals to the poor, exploiting them, treating them unjustly, and he acted with great vehemence and overthrew the tables and drove the money changers out. He said, "Don't make the house of God a den of thieves!" He was very strong when he saw the terrible injustice going on right in God's house.

And then he came back a day or two later and was teaching in the precincts of the temple and that's when the Pharisees and Scribes came up to him and said, "Tell us by what authority you're doing these things." Jesus first asked them a question, 'Well, what about John the Baptist?' (This was two Sundays ago, if we remember.) Jesus was challenging them, 'Why didn't you listen to John the Baptist? Was he a prophet or not?'

Then they came back, 'Well, if we say he was a prophet and we haven't followed him, there's something wrong with us, but if we don't say he's a prophet, then the people will be after us because they all recognized him as a prophet,' so they just said nothing. That's when Jesus tells them, as we heard last Sunday, a parable about the two sons, one who said he would obey his father's command, and the other said he wouldn't. Then the one who did not say he would do it, did it; the other one did not do it. Jesus was telling the Scribes and Pharisees, "You're like that. You say you follow God's word, but you don't."

Today in this even more powerful parable, Jesus is clearly speaking about these chief priests, the Scribes and Pharisees. As you remember at the very end of the gospel, when the chief priests and the Pharisees heard these parables, they realized Jesus was referring to them. He was challenging the leaders of the chosen people, the religious leaders who had been failing to carry out their tasks to lead the people faithfully. In fact, they were instead falling into corruption through those injustices that were going on in the temple.

They were failing to teach the people the genuine law of God, not those 613 human laws that had been devised, that they had imposed upon the people, and would not even do themselves, as Jesus challenged them, told them, 'You insist that the people do this but you don't carry the burden yourself.' He was accusing them of being Pharisees and today he is clearly indicating that they were those [tenants] that God had entrusted.

And we know it's God's people because of the first lesson today, where Isaiah describes God's people as a vineyard that God has tended, cared for and loved, but a vineyard, the chosen people, who fell short of what God wanted. In the gospel, Jesus is making clear it's because the leaders failed the people. Jesus is talking about them. God sends prophets to them, they stone them, kill them, drive them away. God even sends God's own son and the parable says when the landowner did that, they took the son outside and killed him.

Clearly, Matthew is referring to how they took Jesus outside of Jerusalem and killed him, the son of God. But as we listen to this, there is a danger that could lead us to be somewhat anti-Semitic, blaming the Jewish people for what happened the way Jesus describes this in the parable, but we must be careful not to interpret it that way. Yes, the chosen people in Isaiah were God's people and when God tried to tend that vineyard and bring it to fullness of life, the people failed. As Isaiah said, they turned to violence, they turned to injustice, so they experienced the invasion of the Assyrians and that's how they were destroyed at that time.

But now, in the gospel, Matthew isn't just talking about what happened in the past. As always, when we're listening to the gospels, we must recognize that this gospel was written some 30 years after Jesus died and

Matthew was talking about situations in his own church community, where in some ways the leaders are failing, but even more important as we listen to it today, we should be aware that God is speaking to us through this gospel of Matthew about what is happening in our church now.

Of course, all of us, I think, when we begin to think about authority in the church, we think of ourselves as being those who have to obey authority. We don't think of ourselves as those who sometimes must critique authority in our church. Jesus was a layperson, if you want to put it that way, and yet he stood up to the religious leaders, and when they were going wrong, he challenged them, trying to get them to understand, they were leading the people the wrong way. So the same thing is true now in our church. In some ways, I think, our leadership is failing us. Why do we not have enough priests? Why?

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Why should a church like this not have a full-time pastor of its own -- any community, every community? Because leadership in our church is failing to really listen to what God is saying. There's a whole, large community of people who could minister in this church as ordained ministers, but the leadership of our church refuses to open up the priesthood to married people, to women. That's a failure. Or maybe even more immediate, it comes to my mind and I'm sure you know I've spoken about this before, how the church leadership has failed in dealing with the sex abuse crisis that has so diminished our church in so many ways. That's a terrible failure.

I've heard people conclude, and it seems justified, that the bishops care more about money than they do about the victims. That seems to be true very often. Or also in the guidance that we receive. A couple of weeks ago, or maybe it was more recently than that, probably all of us became aware of what is called the "Bush Doctrine." Remember, that was in an interview that Governor Palin was experiencing with Charlie Gibson on ABC News? He asked her, "What about the Bush Doctrine," and she didn't seem to know, or she didn't know, and maybe most of us didn't know either, if you want to tell the truth about it, but it was a very important doctrine and every one of us should have known about it.

The doctrine is that you're justified in going to war, even when there's no present cause. The Bush Doctrine was preemptive war is justified and we went to war in a preemptive way, when we were never under attack, a war that's resulted in five million people becoming refugees. Out of 25 million people in Iraq, five million are refugees, being driven out of their homes, half of them driven out of their country. Hundreds of thousands killed, many hundreds or tens of thousands wounded. I'm talking about civilian Iraqi people?because there is no guidance.

You'll hear in a couple weeks, or maybe you've heard already, about Proposal 2*. Every parish is being instructed to talk about Proposal 2 and why you should be against Proposal 2. That's fine, but where were the bishops when we were going into war preemptively? They were quiet -- you never heard a thing -- so most of us failed to understand how wrong the Bush Doctrine is, so we continue to be in a war that continues to bring terrible suffering to people -- our own people, those of our young men and women who have been killed, and the tens of thousands who have been mutilated or left with severe emotional problems. We didn't get the guidance. So Jesus challenged the leaders of his time.

Clearly it seems to me, if we're listening to the gospel today, Jesus is saying to you and to me, 'We must challenge our leaders, call them to be the leaders God has ordained them to be.' Jesus did it and paid a terrible price, and perhaps we would have to pay a price, but it is our task, I think, if we want to follow Jesus, to challenge sometimes, even those who are in positions of leadership.

Now, very briefly, these scriptures today also tell us of the extraordinary love of God. In John's letter, a passage that we're very familiar with, the first letter of St. John, he tells us, "Whoever does not love has not known God, for God is love. And this is love, not that we love God, but that God first loved us and sent Jesus as one who gave himself for us. Dear friends, if such has been the love of God, we too must love one another." Now isn't that what's being brought out in today's lesson, that passage about the vineyard in Isaiah, where God speaks, "What more is there to do that I have not done for my vineyard?"

God had taken the chosen people described as a vineyard, brought them together, nourished them with his word, nourished them with the manna in the desert, had guided them, loved them, and God continued to send prophets to them to call them back every time they began to fall away. And in the gospel lesson, the land owner does something so foolish. First he sends messengers, three who are killed. Then he sends another set of messengers; they're killed. Well, obviously he should not send his son, should he? But he does because there's no limit to what he's trying to do to show his love for that vineyard, and that's the way God is for us.

There's no limit to the love that God has for us. We need to learn this, that there's nothing more God could do for us, as God says about his vineyard in the first lesson. God's willing to send Jesus into our midst to show us how to love and to be love, even though Jesus suffers for it. This is the kind of love, not that we first loved God; that God first loved us. So we're called to try to follow that way of love. If we do, then clearly what will happen to us is what Paul says in our second lesson today, "Put into practice what you have learned and then the God of peace will be with you and fill you with God's peace."

*Proposal 2 is a Michigan ballot proposal that would repeal the state's ban on the destruction of embryos in stem cell research.

[Bishop Gumbleton delivered this homily at Homily at St. Hilary Parish in Redford, Mich.]

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