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Practical ways to be doers of the word

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

Peter was saying "We're going to follow you," Bishop Gumbleton says in his homily for Aug. 30. "That means that we are going to live according to Jesus' way, according to his values. ... With the readings for the few weeks, we will be trying to discern more deeply and carefully what it means to follow Jesus. What are his teachings? How do they differ from what we hear in the rest of the world around us?"

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Before reflection on today's scriptures, I think it is important to remind ourselves of where we left off last week with the Gospel of John that we were listening to for a number of Sundays. You will remember it was about the feeding of the multitudes in the desert and then two long discourses that Jesus spoke teaching the people the significance of that event and how it really was a representation of the Last Supper when he gave us his body and blood under the form of bread and wine. And at the end of it, he challenged the people to really believe that he was the one who came down from heaven -- the living bread -- and that we was really present in their midst in that sacrament.

John remarked, "There were many who refused to believe and they walked away." Then Jesus said to the disciples -- and said to us -- "Will you also go away." St. Peter spoke up, you'll remember, and said, "Lord to whom should we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Peter was saying "We're going to follow you." That is where we were last Sunday, saying, each of us as we celebrated that Sunday in Ordinary Time of God, "We will follow Jesus." That means that we are going to live according to his way, according to his values. Now the scriptures show us what that means. With the readings for the few weeks, we will be trying to discern more deeply and carefully what it means to follow Jesus. What are his teachings? How do they differ from what we hear in the rest of the world

around us?

The first thing that comes to mind today is how Jesus had said, not in today's Gospel but at another time, "I have come not to destroy the law but to fulfill it." That is because Jesus, as we should also, had a very deep reverence for God's law.

Drawing from the words of today's first lesson, where Moses tells the people -- Jesus himself would have heard these words himself many times and listened to them carefully -- "listen to the norms and laws that I teach you that you may put them into practice, and you will live, you will live and take possession of the land which God gives you. Do not add anything to what I command you or take anything away from it. But keep the commandments of God as I command you." Jesus had a deep reverence for those commandments of God. They bring life to us even in this world if we live according to God's laws.

Jesus teaches us that the first revelation of God's ways come to us through the Hebrew scriptures, which he knew, which he learned as a child and lived out in his life. For Jesus, those Hebrew scriptures could also be easily misinterpreted, or changed or added to. And that is what happens in today's gospel. We see that Jesus is upset, because instead of looking at the simplicity and the goodness of God's laws, the leaders of the chosen people over the centuries had added what Jesus calls many human traditions, human laws, and made them a burden to the people. Rules and regulations that you must follow in great detail.

Jesus was upset with that. "You go no further than appearances." You see, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law would come to him and criticize his disciples because they didn't follow a ritual custom that had been imposed, not by God, but by a human tradition. Jesus was saying, "You're hypocrites." That is in fact what he was saying. "You don't listen to the depth of the law and follow its deepest meaning. You try to live according to surface things, rules and regulations, that had been added. In fact, as Jesus reminds them -- and we need to listen this -- sometimes we put that human law ahead of God's law.

In this very passage of the Gospel -- it was left out of today's reading, but it is right here -- Jesus gives an extraordinary example of how people would disregard God's law about caring for every person and putting a human law in place of it. For example, Jesus said, "Moses told us, do your duty to your father and your mother. Whoever might curse a mother or father is to be put to death. But according to you" -- Jesus is saying Moses said have a deep reverence for your mother and father -- "but according to you, someone could say to his father or mother 'I already declared *qorban*, which means 'offered to God,' what could have been expected from me.'" In other words, a person takes his or her wealth very ceremoniously and piously says, "I dedicate all this to God." So their parents could be starving, but I can't touch that because I have dedicated that to God, so I can't give it to you."

How evil. Absurd. We can see that so clearly. Yet that had become the law. You could declare something *qorban*, or dedicated to God, and it wouldn't have to be used for any other purpose. You would enjoy it the rest of your life, but no other purpose could be given to it.

"In this case, you no longer permit help to your parents. So you nullify the word God through the tradition that you have handed on. Jesus says, "And you do many other things like that." That is what we have to watch out for, that we don't put some human traditions, some rules and regulations, even some that are given to us through our church structures. These came through the religious structures of Jesus time. The leaders of the chosen people, the scribes, the Pharisees, the priests, they were imposing these laws. Jesus says, you have to see through that; see what really counts, and follow God's laws, which he himself summed up, we all know: the first and greatest commandment is love God with your whole heart, mind and soul and love your neighbor as yourself.

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When we get to that, we try to understand how Jesus wants us to live out his word, to follow him faithfully. We have a very good teacher in James, the brother of the Lord. When he tells us after describing what we heard in this second lesson, how the law of God comes from above and it is good, James says, "Be doers of the word."

How easy it is to sit here and listen to the Word of God every Sunday. Take it in. Pray about it. Reflect on it. But then we go back out into our everyday life and don't act on it.

What a loss.

if we really listened to God's word, we not only transform our own lives, and enter into God's reign of peace, love and joy, but we begin to transform the world around us, if we are doers of God's word. The word that is written in the scriptures, but also Jesus who is the word of God. That is what we commit ourselves to do if we say, "Yes, we will follow Jesus. WE will be doers of God's word."

James makes it so practical. "In the sight of God, genuine, blameless religion lies in this" -- this is doing God's word -- "helping the orphans and widows in their need and keeping oneself from the world's corruption." In other words, reaching out to the most vulnerable, the poorest, the ones most in need, always thinking of those first. That what James says is authentic, blameless religion. It is almost a repetition of the words from the prophet Micah that we hear when we are reflection on what it means to have true religion. "Act justly, love tenderly and follow humbly the way of God."

That is what James is saying. Reach out to the poor and vulnerable. There are very practical ways in which we must try to do this.

In the world in which we live, there are a couple of things happening that we need to apply these teachings to I think. We live in the world in which there is such an extraordinary gap between those who have and those who do not. The poor, the vulnerable, the weak. In our own country that gap is very large. One way in which we experience that gap is through the lack of health care. So many people, millions of people, in our country do without health care. Recently an article pointed a study from the National Academy of Sciences, that every year 18,000 people die unnecessarily because they have no health insurance. That is one person every half hour. In our country. The richest country in the world.

Can't we provide health care as other nations do? Must we not work to find a way to do this? To reach out in generosity and love, so that the poor and the vulnerable will have what they need to live.

Health care is only one thing. We need in our world if you go beyond the United States, to reach out to the hundreds of millions who lack the barest necessities of human life.

The other thing I think of because it was prominent in the news this week. The violence we do in our world is so contrary to the way of Jesus. You probably heard because it was in the news two or three times this past week: August has become the month in which we have experienced the largest numbers of deaths in the war in which we are engaged in now, the war that has been going on since 1991. How can we continue to let that happen? And it is not just the deaths of our young men and women. If you go over to Afghanistan or try to find out anything about it, you'll find out that tens of thousands of people have been uprooted from their villages.

They are wondering homeless, hungry, poor, because we are engaged in a war over there and hardly anyone that I know of can say why. We allow ourselves to resort to violence almost automatically. Instead of saying, "What did Jesus do, how did Jesus act?" And he always acted only out of love.

Today as we listen to God's word, and we do that so we can follow Jesus more faithfully, I hope we will also commit ourselves to being doers of that word, so that we can bring a fullness of life to ourselves and to those around us. To be doers of the word so that we can transform our world so that it can become more, a true image of the reign of God, the reign of peace and love and joy.

[This homily was preached at St. Hilary Parish, Redford, Mich, on Aug. 30. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. **Sign up here** to receive an e-mail alert when the latest homily is posted. Send this homily **to a friend.**]

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