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Marriage: A prophetic way of life

Thomas Gumbleton | Oct. 9, 2009 The Peace Pulpit

As we reflect on the readings this morning, I think it is important to remind ourselves of the context within which we are listening. First of all we go back to the fact that over these past weeks, Jesus and the disciples are on their way to Jerusalem for the final events of the life of Jesus, his suffering, death and resurrection. But along the way, Jesus is instructing them.

Last week, remember, Jesus instructed the disciples on how to be a prophetic community of disciples. Jesus rebuked John, because John was trying to exclude others who were preaching and acting in the name of Jesus. Like Mosses last week, Jesus wanted all his disciples to be prophets. Moses had rebuked Joshua, because Joshua was trying to say, No, those who are not part of the group, can?t be prophet. But Jesus is saying as Moses did, ?Oh would that all would be prophets.?

Today our lessons speak about a very important part of the prophetic work of our church and that prophetic mission of the church in today?s scriptures is highlighted by the prophetic role -- the prophetic role -- of married people.

Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Genesis 2:18-24

Psalm 128:1-2, 3, 4-5, 6

Hebrews 2:9-11

Mark 10:2-16

Full text of the readings [1]

Now I think that most of the married people here, and I know when I help a couple to get ready for marriage, seldom do they immediately think that their living out of the sacrament of marriage, which they give to each other, is truly a call to be prophetic, but listen to the prayer that we say at the beginning of the Eucharistic celebration within which we celebrate the sacrament of marriage. The person who is presiding and witnessing the giving of the vows of a man and women to each other prays for them and asks the whole community to pray:

> God you have made the bond of marriage a holy mystery, a symbol of the love of Jesus for his church. Hear our prayers for ? and we name the couple ? with faith in you and in each other they pledge their love today. May their lives always bear witness to the reality of that love.

May their lives always bear witness to the reality of that love. A love that is a symbol of the love of Jesus for his church.

Here is a truly a prophetic call. To be witnesses, to proclaim a truth. That is what a prophet is, and married people are asked to proclaim the truth about Jesus and his love for his church. They are to become the very symbol of that.

Now in the lessons today, we hear -- sadly -- how people fall short. In the gospel, the Pharisees come and try to test Jesus: Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife? Well, Jesus says, yes, according to the law that you received from Moses there is such a provision. But, Jesus says, that is not how God intended it from the beginning. You have fallen far short. Jesus takes them back to what was our first lesson today: how God formed man and woman from one another so that they were bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh. They were fully equal. Each a creature of God, loved into the being of God, and they were to become one. Male and female, God made them. They needed to grow into the love that would make the two become one body, totally united. Two persons in the deep bond of love that they share, deeply. At every level of being human. Intellectually, spirituality, emotionally, physically, the two become one. That is how God intended it, and Jesus carries that on.

It?s the kind of love that Jesus had for his community of disciples, the church. It?s a love that is unconditional. A love in which there is mutuality. A love where each is equal to the other. In the law that Moses had allowed, a man could divorce his wife. But a wife couldn?t divorce her husband. There was no equality. The wife was property. Jesus in his discussion with the Pharisees tries to take that part away, if the husband can do it, the wife can do it. But still, it was not what God intended.

Married people are called to this kind of mutual, loving relationship. That takes us back to what God intended in the beginning, and it is what Jesus said about himself. That those who are married to one another provide a symbol for how Jesus loves the church: unbreakable, unlimited, unconditional love.

And in the gospel, the final image that Jesus offers, when he takes a little child and says unless you become like little children you will not enter the reign of God. Now he didn?t mean that we should be childish, but what Jesus meant is that with children there is no domination. A child doesn?t dominate over a community and a child needs nurturing. That is how it has to be in married life. Not domination, but mutuality and a constant nurturing of one another.

Obviously that is something very beautiful and if we make it happen, truly, it is a prophetic message to the world in which we live.

Most of us, I am sure, have been to weddings where they use what we call the wedding candle. It is a beautiful symbol. After the man and woman have exchanged their promises, they have exchanged their rings as a symbol of their determination to be totally faithful, then the two the individual candles that had been lighted at the been lighted at the beginning as symbol of the individual lights of each and their families and they then they take those two candles and combine the lights and light the candle in the middle, which is a symbol of their married love. The two individuals bond themselves symbolically and become one. It?s a very beautiful symbol, isn?t it?

It is done in two ways. Sometimes the individual candles are then extinguished and put down and only the wedding candle remains lighted. But other times, the two individual candles are left lighted. Either way is acceptable, but I think that really shows what is this prophetic way of married life, because when two people get married, they don?t extinguish their individuality. One does not dominate the other ? if we live out the prophetic message of Jesus ? each nurtures the other. Each loves the other. Each tries to draw the other into the fullness of the human person God intends everyone to be.

Very difficult, but what a marvelous reality.

That is why we always pray at a wedding that this couple may always bear witness to the reality of that kind of love, mutual, equal, nurturing, so that each becomes the full person he or she is called to be, but at the same time bonded to each other in the deepest bond of love possible.

A prophetic witness, there is no doubt about it. As we reflect on this today, what Jesus calls married people to be within our church, calls them to live out the sacrament that they give to each other. Certainly it is something to celebrate, isn?t it? This kind of prophetic witness that is given to us by all the married people in our community. But it also something that calls us to prayer, obviously. We must continue to make that prayer that we say at the wedding: May their lives always bear witness to reality of that love.

A difficult call to be this kind of prophet within our communities. We must prayer for them.

And finally, we must pray for ourselves. Those who are not called to be prophetic through married love, are still called to live out friendship. All our relationships should be model on same way as married love. Where we have mutuality, equality. Everyone equal in freedom and dignity within our community.

Pray that we can become that kind of community drawing from the prophetic teaching given to us by married people, based on what Jesus teaches, what God teaches. Drawing on that so that as people said in the earliest days of the church. See how these Christians love one another. Through the prophetic witness of married people our whole church becomes a prophetic witness to the love that God has for all of us and for all of creature.

We must pray that that will happen.

[Bishop Gumbleton preached this homily at St. Francis Inn, Philadelphia, Pa.]

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