

The hard part about being a disciple

Thomas Gumbleton | Oct. 29, 2009 The Peace Pulpit

As I reflect on the scriptures today, I can't help but think how patient Jesus is, with the disciples as recorded in the gospel, but also with all of us. Three times along that journey, Jesus has challenged his disciples to follow him, be like him, live according to his ways, his values, follow him, and they really don't seem to get it. But today, kind of as a final attempt, Jesus wants us to try once more -- discover what it means to be a disciple, commit ourselves or at least beg God for the help to commit ourselves -- to be that disciple that Jesus calls us to be.

In today's gospel, which brings to an end this journey to Jerusalem, there's this one final incident that is really a model for us as we try to find the way to follow Jesus. Here is this blind man, Bartimaeus, son of Thimaeus, calling out, "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!" He's a poor, blind beggar, a street person, so the crowds, I presume, don't think Jesus really wants to deal with this man, so they scold him, they try to put him aside: "Why would Jesus want to talk to you?"

But he cries out all the louder, "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus hears the cry and calls Bartimaeus to him. "What do you want? What do you want?" The man's answer is a model for us: "Lord, that I might see." Thinking immediately, he's blind, he wants to see physically, see the world around him, the beauty, everything in it. But it's also true, isn't it, that we use seeing, our physical sight, as an image of a deeper sight, of understanding.

Sometimes we even say paradoxically, "Oh, I see what you are saying." Words coming out of someone else's mouth, I can see? Well, we mean "I understand." So this incident is a model for us. It's not just Jesus allowing the man to see physically for the first time, but it's really a model for understanding. "That I might see." This is the prayer that we're called to make today, this last incident on the way to Jerusalem. Are we going to be disciples of Jesus or not? That I might see.

We must go back again, to those incidents that happened along the way. First of all, when Jesus for the first time proclaimed that he was going up to Jerusalem, be handed over to his enemies, be tortured, put to death, and then rise on the third day, Peter, you'll recall, said, "No, you don't have to do that," but then remember Jesus said, "Get behind me, you Satan!" Peter was rejecting what Jesus urges us to accept, that sometimes it's only through the way of the cross that we come deeply to God. Suffering is a mystery; no one wants to suffer, and yet sometimes, well, inevitably, suffering will be part of our lives.

How we accept and live through that suffering can determine if we really are a disciple of Jesus. "If you want to be my disciple, deny your very self. Come, follow me." Through the way of suffering, we come to a deeper union with God through Jesus, who bore the most terrible of sufferings for us and came through them to new life. That's a hard part of being a disciple of Jesus. Peter learned his lesson. Jesus said, "Follow me," and so he did and ultimately, through his own martyrdom, he became one who followed Jesus even to that point of giving his life.

We want to see how this mystery of suffering can lead, for us, into blessings. Again, we don't want suffering; I

don't want suffering, but if I follow Jesus, I take up my cross and unite sufferings with him, and through that, our sufferings lead to new life. Also the disciples struggled with Jesus teaching them "you don't need to have the first place." Remember as they were walking along after Jesus, for the second time, predicted his suffering and death, they were not really listening, so as they continued walking along, they started arguing among themselves who is going to be the greatest.

They get to the house where they're going to stay, Jesus says, "What were you talking about on the way?" Well, they didn't want to say because they were embarrassed. It was so contradictory of what he had said and deep down, they knew that. Then Jesus takes that child, puts the child in the midst of them and said, "Look, if you want to enter into the reign of God, you must do it as a child," not by being childish, but by being vulnerable, open, ready to learn, to receive what God is so ready to give to you. Become like a little child, ready to be open to God's gifts, rather than trying to dominate, to have the first place, to be the greatest.

How easy it is for us, if you look at the way we live and our interactions with other people, at times to want to be the one dominating, the one making the decisions, the one who is in charge, who is over all the rest. No; if you're going to follow Jesus, you become like the child and rather than ever dominate, you become the least. That's a very hard part of the teaching of Jesus. But then finally, we remember this from last Sunday, James and John: "We want the first place when you come into in your kingdom. We want to be on your right and your left."

Even after they had heard the third time that the way of Jesus was the way of the cross, they're still looking for places of power and dominance. Jesus says to them, "That's not for me to give to you. If you want to be my disciples, then you simply must follow me." The other disciples had heard about what James and John did and they began to argue among themselves, and then argue against James and John for seeking the top places. They were envious. That's when Jesus said to them: "Look among the Gentiles. Those who have positions of authority lord it over the others, but among you it cannot be that way. You must deny your very self, take up your cross and follow me." It cannot be that way. Again, you cannot want those places of power, dominance and lording it over others.

The way of following Jesus is a very difficult way. We want to have positions of power, authority, lording it over others. We want wealth. In part of this journey, Jesus had dealt with the man who came up to him and said, "What must I do to be saved?" Do you remember that? Jesus said, "Keep the commandments." "I've done that since my youth." "Well, if you really want to follow me, go sell everything, give it to the poor, then come follow me." It's difficult to be a disciple of Jesus. His ways are not our ways. His thoughts are not our thoughts so often.

How many of us have that attitude regarding our material wealth? That incident is so compelling if we listen to it, "Go sell all that you have, give it to the poor and follow me," let go of your material possessions. Now Jesus doesn't mean literally, every one of us must become destitute, but it's the attitude toward our material wealth.

A long time ago, St. Ambrose, back in the fourth century, preaching to the church in Milan where he was bishop, urging the people then to follow this way of Jesus, reminded them, when you give something to the poor, a poor person comes and you respond and give something (and these are Ambrose's words), "you are not making a gift of your possessions to the poor person; you are handing over to that person what is already theirs." See, everything we have is a gift, and we have to be ready to let it go any time if God were to ask that of us. That's a hard attitude to develop, that all of these things I have are not really mine; they're a gift from God and we must have the spirit and attitude of being able to let go at any time. How hard that is. We want to think, "This is mine," but really it isn't. Everything is a gift.

Well, being a disciple of Jesus is very difficult and that's why we really have to listen deeply to today's lesson. In the first lesson, you discover the beginning of this teaching when through Jeremiah, God announces to the

people that they are going to return from exile: "I will gather them from the ends of the earth," God promises, but then notice, "with the blind and the lame in their midst, the mothers and those with child." The first ones in that return, the first ones God really looks out for are the blind and the lame, the mothers and those with child, the little ones. They're the ones that God cherishes most of all, and that's the attitude God wants us to have, to be little ones, ready to accept from God with gratitude, all that God will give to us.

Even Jesus, as we hear in the second lesson today, is able to deal patiently with those who do not respond, are falling away, or as the author of that letter to the Hebrews says, "Jesus himself is beset by weakness." In other words, that author says we must rejoice in our conviction that Jesus didn't honor himself; God honored Jesus as God honors all weak and limited human beings. Jesus is truly human, so in his humanness and his weakness, God accepts Jesus. What's more, Jesus is our model. "If you want to be my disciple, become weak, deny yourself, take up your cross, be a little one, and follow me."

Are we ready to follow Jesus as his disciples? That's the question that I hope we allow to enter deeply into our awareness. Are we ready to follow Jesus? As we look into our lives, I'm sure that all of us have to make changes in order to be a genuine, authentic, true follower of Jesus. So this morning as we listen to this gospel, we must put ourselves in the place of Bartimaeus, come before Jesus and beg, "Lord, that I may see. Lord, that I may see, in order to become your disciple and to follow you."

[This homily was preached at St. Hilary Parish, Redford, Mich.]

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