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The work Jesus gives to us

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

As we listen to the first lesson this morning, I think perhaps we might not have really perceived the genius and the wisdom of Nehemiah and Ezra the priest. They were situated at a time when the chosen people had been dispersed, scattered, the unity of the nation was destroyed. They had been taken into a very difficult kind of exile. Many had betrayed their commitment to God that had been made, that covenant that had been made by God whereby God became their God and they were God's people. Now they had come back, found everything destroyed and over a period of years, they were trying to come together again, to rebuild their city, rebuild their temple, but most of all to rebuild themselves as a people.

Here is where the genius of Ezra and Nehemiah, I think, comes forth -- how to do that, how to pull themselves together, to really become one people, one community of believing people committed to serve God. Third Sunday in Ordinary Time
Nehemiah 8:2-4, 5-10, 8-10 They used this method of reading the word of God. The Torah, the five books, the original Hebrew scriptures, the first five, especially the book of Exodus which recounted their journey through the desert; Deuteronomy, where Moses began to receive from God the Law that was the basis of their covenant. So they read, and if you noticed, it was from early morning until midday and the people were beginning to absorb once more, what it meant to be God's people. Psalm 119:8, 9, 10, 15 Toward the end, Ezra the teacher of the law said to them, "This day is dedicated to your God, so do not be sad or weep." He said this because 1 Corinthians 12:12-30 all wept when they heard the reading of the Law.

Luke 1:1-4, 4:14-21 They began to realize how they had failed, how they had not been faithful to God's word. They wept, and in their common weeping, they were bonded together. So then Ezra said to them, "Don't weep, go and eat rich foods, drink sweet wine and share with anyone who has nothing prepared. This day is dedicated to God so do not be sad. The joy of God is our strength," so he bound them together again through that word of God. We will not have the same powerful experience, I'm sure, but if we listen deeply to God's word

today, we too can be bound together more closely as God's people, and not only we who are gathered here in this community, but gathered together with all God's people, all members of the human family, to deepen our sense of unity and oneness.

In our Eucharistic prayer, we proclaim how Jesus was sent because people had turned away from God, no longer loved one another. Jesus opened our eyes and our hearts to understand that we are brothers and sisters and that God is the one God of all. That's what we can realize today if we listen to what Paul says to that church at Corinth that was so badly divided. He reminds them: Look in Jesus, the son of God, who has come in to human history, become part of the human family; everyone is a member of that human family and is enlivened by God, becomes part of God's people. And like the human body, we all depend upon one another in the whole human family. We deepen our relationship as we acknowledge Jesus, son of God, as the one who comes into our world to transform our world into the reign of God.

But the fundamental truth is that all of us in the whole human family are bound together as one. Paul is trying to teach us this with that very powerful analogy -- no part is more important than another part because every part depends upon another part. No one part can go by itself; we have to work together to be one. One of the extraordinary things about the human body is that when one part is hurting, the human body begins to focus on that part. Healing powers are directed toward the part that is hurting, that is wounded. It's very hard, I think, for us to get the full significance of what this can mean, but I know, in Haiti, we have an extraordinary example of how people have come together as one, and those that are hurting are being lifted up, healed, helped by others who have also lost so much.

I'm sure some of us have seen reports of how there's violence there, people are looting and killing and so on; that's very minimal. Here's what's really happening in Haiti. This is a report from friends of mine:

"This afternoon, feeling helpless, we decided to take a van down to Champs Mars, the area around the [presidential] palace, to look for people needing medical care to bring to Matthew 25, the guesthouse where we are staying which has been transformed into a field hospital. Since we arrived in Port-au-Prince, everyone has told us that you cannot go into the area around the palace because of violence and insecurity. But I was in awe as we walked into downtown, among the flattened buildings, in the shadow of the fallen palace, among the swarms of displaced people there was calm and solidarity.

"We wound our way through the camp asking for injured people who needed to get to the hospital. Despite everyone telling us that as soon as we did this we would be mobbed by people, I was amazed as we approached each tent; people gently pointed us towards their neighbors, guiding us to those who were suffering the most. We picked up five badly injured people and drove towards an area where we had passed a woman earlier. When they saw her she was lying on the side of the road with a broken leg screaming for help. They were on foot and could not help her at the time, so we went back to try to find her. Incredibly, we found her relatively quickly at the top of a hill of shattered houses. The sun was setting and the community helped to carry her down the hill on a refrigerator door; tough-looking people smiled in our direction calling out, "Good cheer! God's blessings!"

That's what's happening in Haiti. People are reaching out in love and concern for those that are most hurt, most injured. That's the kind of way we need to act, not just in a crisis period, but all the time, that we reach out to one another in our parish family, our civil community and our human family -- that we have that sense of concern and care, especially for those who are most hurting and most in need.

The lesson of St. Paul, I think, is very powerful: we are one body, and as one body now, you and I must

reach out with generosity, care and love for the members of our human family who are hurting so terribly in the country of Haiti. But the gospel lesson also teaches us something very, very important today. This is a lesson where Jesus describes his very mission. As he read those words of Isaiah that are so powerful, we're familiar with them, the good news of God, "God has sent me to proclaim that good news, to give the blind new sight, heal the broken-hearted, set the downtrodden free, proclaim God's year of favor," and Jesus says, "This day, this scripture passage is fulfilled as you listen, in me." He's saying, "That's my work in the world," and of course we know that that's also the work Jesus gives to us. We are the body of Jesus, the body of Christ, carrying on that mission in the world.

And when it comes to Haiti, it's very important for us to realize. Because we have been told that this is the poorest country in our hemisphere, one of the poorest countries in the world and many times, people begin to think, "What's wrong with that country? They have more assistance pouring in there than almost any other country on a percentage basis. Why can't they ever pick themselves up? It's not the fault of the Haitian people; it's the injustice that's been done to them from the very beginning of their history. There isn't time this morning to go through the whole history, but in 1804, this was a slave country dominated by the empire of France under Napoleon, and yet these slaves were able to engineer a revolt that overthrew the army of France. They declared their freedom. They became an independent republic, just as we had done 28 years before.

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You would think that the United States would rejoice, "Another republic in our hemisphere!" Instead, we supported the French in repressing the people of Haiti from the very beginning. The French troops had been driven out, but then they came back, ships in the bay, threatening to invade again unless the people of Haiti begin to pay reparations. France accused them of stealing their property and of course, the property were the people who were bringing great riches to France, so they imposed reparations, and that went on from 1825 to 1947, that the people of Haiti paid reparations to France with the support of the United States. They were forced into desperate poverty in the very beginning and in spite of that, they continue to be a nation that has pride and that really works to bring as many blessings as they can to themselves.

Down through the history of Haiti, the United States in 1915 invaded -- we invaded Haiti -- and occupied that country until 1934, a brutal occupation to keep the people of Haiti down. And after we left Haiti, later on we supported two of the most cruel tyrants in any place in the world, the Duvaliers -- Papa Doc, Baby Doc -- and during that period of time, we supplied foreign aid and assistance, mostly military, to enable those tyrants to stay in power. During those decades, tens of thousands of people were tortured, murdered and killed. That's the history of Haiti. They need to be set free, truly free once more, and it's our job, first of all to understand, not to accept what we hear about Haiti as a country that cannot lift itself up, as a country that cannot support itself. No; these are people with beauty and dignity and resilience and strength. If we were to back away and let the people of Haiti really come alive, they could do it. They could rebuild their nation, become once more a nation of wealth and self-support as it was at the very beginning until the French came back and destroyed it.

It's our task to proclaim good news to the poor by bringing assistance, help, love and care, but also to set the downtrodden free, to try to make sure that our nation and other nations in the world stop the oppression of Haiti, to allow that nation to begin to really be alive and be strengthened, and be a nation where the people can begin to enjoy the gifts that God has given to all, the gifts that make every person able to be a full human person, blessed by God and living a full human life. I hope that as we gather together today, that we hear God's word deeply, that we understand that word has formed and shaped us,

and that that word calls us to constantly remind ourselves that we are one human family, the body of Christ in this world, and that we carry on the work of Christ, the work that means we help to remove oppression, to give the blind new sight, set the downtrodden free; most of all that we, every one of us, go out into our world and become good news to the poor, especially to the poor and oppressed of Haiti.

[Bishop Thomas Gumbleton celebrated a Mass for the people of Haiti at St. Leo Church in Detroit, Jan. 24.]

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