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Have no fear when the heat comes

Thomas Gumbleton | Feb. 18, 2010 The Peace Pulpit

Most of us are very familiar with the beatitudes as they are proclaimed in Matthew's gospel. The first beatitude especially seems to be an easier way of hearing what Jesus is saying, "Blessed are the poor in spirit. Theirs is the reign of God." But Luke simply says, "Blessed are the poor," the poor -- those who are without, "theirs is the reign of God." Matthew also does not give the four woes as Luke does, "Woe to those who are rich." When we hear those words proclaimed by Jesus, I think it makes all of us a bit uncomfortable because we know that we have so many blessings.

So we really wonder, I think, well, for many reasons about these words of Jesus, but especially about "Blessed are the poor." How could Jesus say that in a world where we confront, if we have any awareness at all, an extreme degree of absolute poverty for over a billion people on our planet? Absolute poverty means they have nothing. They're living in misery, desolation. What word can you use to describe that situation for those who are absolutely poor? How can Jesus say they are blessed?

It's important to realize what Jesus is saying. He's not referring to social classes, the rich one class and the poor another. What Jesus is talking about is that the poor are those who know their need of God. It's much deeper than whether you have material things or don't; it's how you relate to God. And probably, it is a bit easier for those who do not have much, to realize their dependence upon God, but all of us need to learn this. We need to be aware that whatever blessings we have are a gift from God.

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Jeremiah 17:5-8
Psalm 1:1-2, 3, 4, 6
1 Corinthians 15:12, 16-20
Luke 6:17, 20-26
Full text of the readings [1]

We need to be aware that our very being here on this planet, our life, the fact that we exist, it's only because God has called us into existence out of love. Without God's love, we would still be nothing. And unless God sustains us at every moment, there's no reason for us to exist; we would not be here. Our dependence upon God is ultimate, it's total, but it's so easy for us, especially if we are comfortable, to think, "Well, I've done this, I've earned this, I own this, it's mine." No, nothing is ours; everything is God's.

Only when we have that kind of awareness do we then begin to be aware, as Jeremiah pointed out to those people so many years ago, that the person who trusts in God, whose confidence is in God, the one who is aware that everything he or she is and has comes from God, that person is like a tree planted near water, thrust its roots toward the stream and has no fear when the heat comes; their leaves are always green. See, when we trust in God, no matter what is happening, God is nurturing us, nourishing us, bringing us into greater existence of life.

On the other hand, those who are not aware of how we depend upon God at every instance of our existence, then we are not blessed, surely. And it is that which Jesus is trying to awaken us to, an awareness that we are totally dependent upon God at every moment. I had an extraordinary experience of how the poor are blessed in this regard.

When I went to Haiti the week before last, it amazed me how those people, already devastatingly poor, but now suffering from an earthquake that was so overwhelming, how they were not filled with anger, they were not filled with resentment. They were not looting. They were not trying to take things from one another. Everyone I saw was helping one another, putting other people first, trying to come together in a spirit of love. It's because they seem to have that profound awareness of how blessed they are because God is present to them in a very

deep way.

A friend of mine, who was working in a bank called Fonkoze -- she lives in the United States but was in Haiti at the time of the earthquake -- described what happened to her when she was in the building and the earthquake happened. The building began to collapse and she and others were trapped, but she was able to push her way out through a hole, dropped down about 20 feet so was injured quite seriously, but survived. When she wrote about it later, she wrote how "most of us slept outside, well, not really slept, that evening. Everyone slept in the street that night, of course. Either their homes were destroyed or they were afraid to return to damaged homes."

But she says, "I'll never forget that evening. It was strangely beautiful -- a cool, clear evening, star-filled sky, shooting stars -- Haitians outside the house sang all night. I didn't clearly understand the words, but I certainly recognized the tunes. They were singing 'How Great Thou Art,' 'What a Friend We Have in Jesus,' 'I Walk Through the Garden Alone.'" They were very much aware of God being present to them. These are people who have that deep awareness that they depend totally upon God, even in the midst of this catastrophe.

I saw this myself on more than one occasion, when I celebrated the Eucharist in an open field with hundreds of people. Their singing and their joyfulness, even in the midst of their suffering, was incredible. It's because they deeply trust in God and no matter what happens, they know that God is present to them, God loves them, and somehow God will bring them through their suffering to a new and better life.

Think of what it might be if we had a world where every one of us had that deep awareness that everything we have is a gift. Would we be selfish? No. We would know that whatever we had comes from God and is to be shared with one another. That is what is happening among the Haitians. In the midst of their devastation and poverty, they continue to share with one another, they love one another, so in that almost unbelievable scene of suffering, you find joy and peacefulness.

It's going to take a long time for them to totally overcome what has happened, to rebuild their country, to rebuild the city of Port-au-Prince especially, but I'm confident that they will do it because they do have this awareness of their need of God and of everything they have being a gift from God. They will build together. They will make a new city for themselves, a new nation. And if we can even begin to achieve that understanding that they have, if we can even begin to have that deep awareness, everything I am, everything I have is a gift from God, then we will be totally generous in our efforts to help them to return to a place of peace, prosperity, joy, a fullness of life that they deserve as much as anyone on this planet.

We will help them to achieve what God has promised. The reign of God will be theirs, as all of us together share with them in that trust in God, share with them in that awareness that what we have comes from God, and share everything we have with them so that all of us as a human family, as brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of God, will live together, enjoying al the gifts that God has given for everyone.

[This homily was preached at the Church of the Madonna in Detroit, Mich.]

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