

In Jesus, there is no barrier

Thomas Gumbleton | Mar. 18, 2010 The Peace Pulpit

To delve deeply into the scripture lessons today, to hear them deep within our hearts, I think it's very important and really the key to understanding these lessons, to listen very carefully to that very first sentence that St. Paul proclaims in our second lesson: "Brothers and sisters, whoever is in Christ is a new creation. The old things have passed away. Behold, new things have come."

Paul is trying to impress upon us that in Jesus, we who have been baptized into Jesus are now a new creation. Everything of the old has passed away, Paul says; it's entirely, radically new -- if only we can grasp this.

In fact, Paul teaches us (and this is in the gospel also) how Jesus himself became a new creation. After he went through his passion, death, and then his resurrection, everything for Jesus was new. He was still Son of Man, son of Mary, Sunday of Lent
Everything is radically new for Jesus, no longer confined to time or space. Jesus lives in this new creation, but that's also what is possible for us. In the new creation of Jesus, all barriers are broken down.

St. Paul, in writing to the church in Galatia, reminds them that once you have been baptized into Jesus, because Jesus himself has become a new creation, we too become a new creation. We no longer think of Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. Paul didn't put this in, but we would certainly add black or white. None of those things that we set up as barriers between ourselves exist anymore. In Jesus, everyone is equal. Everyone relates to God through Jesus in exactly the same way. There's no hierarchy; there's only everyone being one in Jesus.

In the church, if we look back into history, we discover in the Acts of the Apostles, the first written history about the church, that it took maybe 50 years for that first Christian community to really grasp the idea that the distinction between Jew and Gentile was gone. See, there was a huge struggle in the early church. Some of the disciples said in order to be a follower of Jesus, you first have to become circumcised, be a Jew, then you move on to become a Christian, but after a struggle, they really grasped this notion that in Jesus, there is no such barrier between Jew and Gentile, no distinction, everyone is one, everyone is equal in Christ.

In regard to slave and free in the church, it took us hundreds of years to break down that barrier, to really take it seriously. In fact (and this may surprise us), it was not until 1965 in the Vatican Council, that for the first time, the church officially declared slavery was a profound moral evil. Up until that time, even within the church, people held slaves, owned other people as property. How could we have missed the message of Jesus so dramatically? But we did and we're still struggling in the church to break down the barriers between men and women.

We live in a church community that still does not truly recognize the full equality of women within the church. We have come closer in our human society in the world to break down those barriers. Women are recognized with their full dignity and their capacity to do whatever job they're capable of doing, be paid the same, just wage; it isn't always happening, but at least the awareness is there. We still have a ways to go in the church to make sure that what Jesus says about this community of disciples, or what Paul describes about the community of disciples, becomes a reality. In Jesus there is no male or female slave or free, Jew or Gentile, black or white.

And maybe the gospel lesson is the most profound part of what we need to reflect on today, because we still have a tendency to make distinctions between -- I guess what we would judge -- good people and bad people. We don't have full inclusiveness in our church. There are times when church officials declare certain people aren't capable of coming to Holy Communion. How can anyone make such a judgment? If you listen to today's gospel, what do you find, and why were the Pharisees and the scribes so angry? It was because Jesus made friends of sinners, those whom they judged weren't obeying the Law faithfully. They were friends of Jesus, sinners, and they were so angry, "He even eats with them," imagine that -- he gathers around the same table and eats with sinners.

Are we going to gather around this table and decide that some people aren't qualified to come forward and be around the table and eat and drink the body and blood of Jesus? Are we going to turn some away? If you listen to the parable, it's very clear the God is a God, as Jesus proclaims, who runs out to meet the sinner, to draw the sinner in, to bring about reconciliation, to heal, and isn't that what we should be doing in our church instead of deciding some are worthy and some are not? Jesus welcomes everybody. That's really, I think, very hard for us to understand and to accept, that there is no one who is unworthy to gather around the table with Jesus.

We're too much like the scribes and the Pharisees and the elder son in the parable, because our whole idea of how we relate to God is wrong. Listen to what the elder son says, "Father, I have slaved for you." His whole idea of his relationship to his father was not one of love without barriers, "I work for you, I've earned." But that's isn't the way we relate to God. We don't earn forgiveness, we don't earn God's love, we don't earn the life of Jesus we receive in baptism. All of these are gifts of God's love. God pours forth that love without our deserving it, without our working to earn it; it's a total gift from God.

You can go to the letter of St. Paul to the church in Rome and there's a very beautiful passage in the fifth chapter, which says this so clearly and so powerfully, where Paul is telling those Christians in Rome: "Consider this, moreover, when Jesus died for us, we were still sinners and unable to do anything." Paul goes on to say, "Few people would accept the idea to die for an upright person" -- You might be willing to give your life for somebody who is really good -- "although for a very good reason, perhaps, someone would give his life for that. But see how God manifested God's love for us. While we were still sinners" -- we hadn't earned a thing -- "Jesus, out of love for us, gave his life. Christ died for us and we have been made holy through his sufferings and death."

That's the way God is to us always, the God who reaches out in love. Picture that father. The son was still a long way off. He was watching for him, he runs out to bring him back, because there's no limit to the love of God for us.

We have to learn how not to put limits among ourselves to the love we pour forth on one another. That's why, at the end of today's second lesson, Paul says, "Look, all of us have been called to be the ambassadors of Jesus, to be the ministers of reconciliation, to be the ones who break down those barriers in our neighborhood communities, in our families, and in our church.

We must begin to develop the spirit that Jesus proclaims today so powerfully in that parable, that there is no one who is not loved by God and who is not welcome to gather around the table with Jesus as we celebrate the Eucharist. When we become that kind of ambassador and we begin to preach and live this whole ministry of reconciliation, there will be great healing within our own hearts, within our own church community, and in our world community too. So it's very important that we take seriously the call Jesus gives to us today, to be ambassadors, ministers of God's reconciliation and love.

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