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Because of Jesus, everything is different

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

To reflect on today's reading, I think it's very helpful if we remind ourselves of last Sunday's reading, because what we are hearing today is really a continuation of what God proclaimed to us last week in an attempt to help us to know more deeply who God is and how God relates to us, and how we relate to one another.

Last Sunday, St. Paul had proclaimed, in our second lesson from the letter to the church at Corinth, "Brothers and sisters, whoever is in Christ is a new creation. The old things have passed away. Behold, new things have come."

Paul was insisting that everything now, because of Jesus, is different. New things have come -- how we related to God, how we related to one another -- and in fact, Paul, in another letter which he wrote to the church Fifth Sunday of Lent he said, "Now in Christ, because there is a new relationship in Christ all of us who have been born into him Isaiah 43:16-21 Among us there is neither slave nor free, rich nor poor, male nor female; we're all one in Christ Jesus." Something new and quite extraordinary has happened.

Last Sunday, to show how different is our relationship with God from what we usually think of it, we heard that parable, that I'm sure we all recall very easily, of the prodigal son and of the brother who was very angry, because that parable showed the father rushing out to embrace the son, even before the son could ever begin to say the words he had prepared of how he wasn't deserving to be the son, he only wanted to be a slave. Philippians 3:8-14 But the father said, "You have returned," and it was just an extraordinary expression of how God loves every one of us -- rushes out to meet us, to embrace us. John 8:1-11

Full text of the readings
Today's lessons are very similar. The first lesson we hear, how God has, for the chosen people, done something new. They've been in exile for over 60 years, suffering terrible tyranny, but now God says, "Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing. Now it springs

forth, do you not perceive it?" God is telling us that there's a whole new way of our relating to God, something new is happening.

Again, in our second lesson today, Paul tells us, "Brothers and sisters, I regard everything as lost because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and I regard them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ." See, what Paul is telling us -- he had been a very devout Jew and had followed the teachings of God proclaimed through the books of the Old Testament, but now in Jesus, all of that is completed and everything is made new in Jesus.

So, we related to God through Jesus in a way that we've never been able to relate to God before. We are the very sons and daughters of God, even as Jesus is the Son of God, and God's love is poured forth upon us as it was in that parable last Sunday, the father representing God, rushing out to embrace the son who had sinned.

And today in the gospel, we get another very beautiful story about how God relates to us through Jesus. I think that we will first be aware of and attracted to the way he treats the woman, But I think it's important as we reflect on the story told in today's gospel to think also of how he treats the Pharisees and the scribes. They are hypocrites and that's what he has exposed by telling them whoever is without sin, throw the first stone.

They had come to test Jesus, and we might not catch this at first, but the test was if he agrees to killing this person, capital punishment, he'll be in violation of the rule of Rome that had been imposed upon the Jewish people, because Rome had taken away from them the authority to impose capital punishment. So he would be in trouble with the Roman authorities. But if he'd said no, then of course the people would say you're not faithful to the Law, so those who were following him might be turned away from him.

But when Jesus exposes their hypocrisy, he does it in a very subtle kind of way. He lets each one reflect on how hypocritical he is by saying, "If you don't have any sin, you may throw the first stone." Well, of course, who could say "I'm not a sinner," so they have to walk away one by one. They admit their sinfulness but they're not exposed to shame or retribution.

But it's especially with the young woman that we see demonstrated the love of God.

I have here a commentary by a scripture scholar who describes a beautiful piece of art. Both of the stories -- last Sunday's parable and today's story -- many, many artists have tried to portray those events and how they show forth God's love. This is a description of Jesus and the fallen woman. It's a painting by a man named Lucas Cranach and he lived around the year 1570. This painting, together with Rembrandt's painting "Return of the Prodigal" is in a museum at St. Petersburg in Russia. Here's the description:

Advertisement

"At the front and center of the painting are Jesus and the woman. The artist captures that moment when Jesus turns toward the accusers and challenges those without sin to cast a stone.

"His expression is stern but troubled and his right hand reaches out toward the woman. Most remarkable, the woman is not bowed to the ground in front of Jesus, as in much artwork, but is standing at his left. She is very young, with eyes closed, looking forlorn and resigned to her fate. Her head is inclined toward Jesus' shoulder, and her hand rests on his arm. But most striking, as one follows the lines of the painting, is that her right hand" -- she's standing next to Jesus -- "is entwined with the left hand of Jesus in a gesture

of exquisite tenderness. The hands of mercy are joined to the hands of a suffering person facing execution."

That, of course, is a beautiful image of God. Jesus, who is God made visible to us, showing forth his very delicate, sensitive, beautiful love for this woman, who is fearful for her very life. She's about to be killed in a very brutal way and her hand is entwined in the hand of Jesus. Very gentle, very personal, very loving, and if we reflect on that, we begin to realize, I think, how that is the kind of love God has for each one of us -- the kind of love God had for the son in the parable of last Sunday, rushing out to forgive before he could even ask for forgiveness, and this tender and gentle love that Jesus showed for the woman who was about to be killed.

That's how God loves you and God loves me, without any limit, without any hesitation, with gentleness, with tenderness, with total forgiveness, always drawing us in toward God. I'm convinced that if we let these images enter into our awareness and we keep reflecting upon them, then our relationship with God will change also. Like Paul, we'll see everything as new, everything as different. "What I was before, that's over. Now I am in love with God through Jesus. Everything else" -- Paul used an extraordinary word -- "is rubbish. This love of God overwhelms me." That's how Paul experienced it.

Again, if we reflect on these images from the gospel, maybe deep in our own hearts we will experience, more deeply than we ever have before, how God's love is reaching out to embrace each one of us in a very tender and very total way. And of course, as we begin to experience more deeply that love of God for us, our hearts go out to God, but also because God is alive in every one of us, our hearts go out to one another. We learn that we must love, not just God, but our brothers and sisters, in all of whom God lives.

These last two weeks of Lent, I think are a time when we can pray more than we have, perhaps, before as we come to the conclusion of Lent, which is a time of prayer, but especially pray that we may grow in our love for God and in our love for one another.

I will conclude today with an example of someone who learned this love of God very profoundly and who learned to love the way Jesus did, loving not just those who love you, but loving your enemy. This is a challenge that perhaps we'll think is beyond us, but it's really the challenge that is given to every one of us by Jesus as Jesus reveals the love of God and shares that love of God with us.

I think of this because this week, on Wednesday, March 24th is the 30th anniversary of the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero, the archbishop of San Salvador in Central America. He was a champion of the poor and the oppressed and he was hated by some who did not like what he preached. On March 24th, as he was celebrating Mass at an altar in a small chapel, where the door was no farther than the back wall of this church, an assassin entered, raised a gun and shot him. He fell to the floor next to the altar and died.

But two weeks before that happened, Archbishop Romero had been interviewed by a reporter over the telephone. The reporter was asking him, at this point in the struggles in El Salvador, "Why don't you leave the country? They're going to kill you," because his name had been put on the death lists and it was obvious that there was going to be an attempt to kill him. Oscar Romero responded by saying, "Yes, I have been threatened with death many times, but I do not believe in death without resurrection, so even if they kill me, I will rise again in the Salvadoran people."

Here was a man of profound faith. He knew that as Jesus had arisen, so would he arise, but then he went on to tell the reporter, "Look, as a shepherd in the church," a bishop, "I am obliged by Divine mandate to give my life for those I love," but then what he says, "that is, for those who may be going to kill me." The first one he thinks of that he must love -- his enemies, "those who may be going to kill me, I give my life for them." Finally in that interview, he said to the reporter: "Look, if, in fact, they kill me, you may tell

them that even now, I bless and forgive those who do it." So when that door opened, the gun was raised, he looked up. It wasn't a look of fear; he knew he would rise again. It wasn't a look of hatred; no, it was a look of love. He loved those who killed him.

Now that's the supreme love that Jesus asks of all of us, as Jesus loved us, died for us out of love and constantly returned love as he was being put to death. We are challenged to love one another, to love even our enemies. Again, the more we try to experience how much God loves us is doing something new in our hearts every day, the more we will be able to respond with love -- love for God; love for our brothers and sisters; even love for our enemies.

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