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Be joyful: God is present in each of us

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

As we reflect on the readings today, I think it's important to begin with what happens at the end of the Gospel, where Jesus says to the man who was cured -- the one among the 10 who came back -- he says to him: "Your faith has saved you."

We must explore, briefly at least, what Jesus means by "Your faith has saved you."

You could almost imagine that the man would have come back and recited something like the Apostles' Creed, because that's how we ordinarily think of faith -- that we have a list of doctrines that we give belief to, we accept. But it wasn't that at all. What it really is, what Jesus is talking about, is what we have reflected on a couple of times over the past weeks.

Psalm 98:1, 2-3, 3-4
We heard some weeks ago from the letter to the Hebrews that faith is the confident assurance concerning things we hope for, and a conviction about the things we cannot see.

2 Kings 5:14-17
2 Timothy 2:8-13
In writing that, the author of the letter to the Hebrews was speaking about the faith of the first disciples -- not things that Jesus had taught them and said, "You must believe this," but rather the faith that came from their experience on that first Sabbath, or Sunday, after Jesus had been crucified and then he was alive.

They experienced his presence and they believed. They came to know him deeply, present within them.

That's what our faith is: coming to know Jesus and building a relationship with Jesus.

Yes, it's important that we sometimes list things that we believe as doctrines, but that really isn't what our faith is. It's coming to know Jesus, relating to Jesus, being loved by him and then returning that love.

With that kind of faith, we begin to understand that when a person believes -- becomes one who knows Jesus and accepts Jesus -- all kinds of boundaries are broken down.

Look at this man who comes back to Jesus. He's a Samaritan, not one of the chosen people, but one who, centuries ago, his people had rejected the Jewish faith and developed a kind of faith of their own that was close to the Jewish faith, but wasn't what the Jews believed.

Yet, Jesus says to this one, this Samaritan, the foreigner, the outsider: "Your faith has saved you" -- because the man had come to recognize Jesus.

It must have been an extraordinary experience for him because as a Samaritan, he would have -- at one point as they were walking along and showed themselves to the priests -- would have experienced a dilemma, because obviously, Jesus met the priests at the temple in Jerusalem, but Samaritans don't worship at that temple.

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They think God is present at the temple in Gerizim. So what would he do? Go with the others to the temple in Jerusalem, where they know God is present, or go to Gerizim where he knows that God is present according to his fellow believers?

Suddenly, he has the insight, "No, God is not limited to a place, Jerusalem, Gerizim or anywhere," and we don't believe in God by going to a certain place.

We show our belief in God by relating to God through Jesus. That's what this man does and that's why he's healed, but Jesus meant by that not just that healing from the leprosy. That had already happened, but his healing is deep, deep within his person. He's a new person because now he relates to God through Jesus.

We get something of the same thing happening in that first lesson today. We can develop an awareness that again, God is not limited.

It's like Paul said to Timothy, "The word of God" -- and here we mean not only the word that we speak, but the Word who is Jesus -- "Is never chained up." Anyone, everyone can connect with Jesus.

In that first lesson, the general, Naaman, wanted to take dirt back with him. Why? Because he thought, because of what had happened to him, where he was cured, that that's where God is, in this place. He feels that if he can take dirt back with him and kind of establish a place of Israel outside the boundaries of the land of Israel, he will always have God present to him.

But again, as we learned, if we really understand what happens in the story with the Samaritan, God is not limited to any place.

God is not limited either by being revealed only to certain people who then teach the others. God is present to every person. Every one of us, when we listen deeply within our hearts, can hear God speaking to us. We can deepen our relationship with God. We can come to know God better and be more aware that God's love is constantly being poured forth upon us. That's the kind of faith that will heal us.

Sometimes, that faith, because it's being spoken by God in every person, challenges some of the very

practices of our church.

For a long time in our church we allowed people to accept a different status for some people from others. I'm thinking here of slavery, which was never condemned in our church until 1965 at the Vatican Council.

Until then, somehow we accepted the idea that some people were lesser than other people. We had set up a boundary in that God wasn't as fully in them, and before slavery developed in our country, when the Spanish invaded Latin America and Central America, the native peoples were allowed to be killed because they were thought of as less than human.

But there were some who began to understand, "No, that's not the way God is. God is present to every person. God is present in all of us and God can speak through all of us."

So sometimes as we're more and more aware that we need change within our church, we must understand that sometimes that change will come, not because a certain group -- the bishops of the church -- say so, but because it comes forth from the people.

I think here of something like women, who are convinced that they are called by God to the priesthood. Cannot God be speaking through them, and through the majority of the people in our church who say, "Yes," to that?

Of course God can be speaking through them, because once any of us open ourselves to the realization that God is alive in Jesus -- and that God lives in every person -- God is entered into human history and human kind and so God is in all of us.

That's why Paul says, at the end of the lesson today: "We might at some time be unfaithful, but God will never, never be unfaithful because God is present within us, and so God cannot be unfaithful to God. We might fall aside, but God will not."

God is always present to us and -- if we're truly listening to what God speaks today through these lessons -- we can have great assurance that as we listen deeply in our own hearts, God can speak to us.

God's love will be poured forth upon us, and we, too, can hear Jesus saying to us: "Go, be joyful. Be at peace. Your faith has saved you."

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

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