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Making the reign of God a reality

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The Peace Pulpit

In order to hear deeply the words that Jesus proclaims to us today, I think it's important once more to remind ourselves that at the beginning of his public life Jesus had proclaimed, "The reign of God is at hand" -- and then he said, "change your lives."

In today's Gospel, Jesus is trying to help us understand what we mean by the reign of God, and perhaps how we must change our lives if we're going to enter into this reign of God.

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
First of all, let me remind you that the reign of God isn't a place. Sometimes we talk about the reign of God as the kingdom of heaven, and that's an appropriate phrase, but it gives us the wrong idea -- we think of a place right away.
Wisdom 12:13, 16-19
Psalm 86:5-6, 9-10, 15-16
The reign of God is the dynamic rule of God's saving love. That's what we mean by the reign of God, what Jesus meant by it: that we begin to live, all of us and all of creation, entering into this rule of God's love, that infinite love of God that is poured forth upon every one of us without our ever earning it.
Romans 8:26-27
Matthew 13:24-43
We're loved into being by God, and Jesus says the reign of God happens when every one of us and all of creation begins to live according to the way of God's saving love.
Begin to live according to the way of God's saving love.

These parables today give us some instruction about how we do live according to this way of love. Earlier, as I mentioned before, Jesus had preached what we call the Sermon on the Mount, and one of the things he said that we find very challenging and yet it's totally necessary if we're going to live according to the reign of God, and that is: love your enemies. Jesus drew that out a bit by saying, "Offer no violent resistance to evil."

Well, if we listen carefully to that first parable, Jesus is showing us how we might respond when an enemy does something evil to us. In the story, the enemy has brought terrible weeds and put them in the man's garden where he has planted good wheat. He could have become angry, gone out and attacked that enemy, tried to do something to retaliate, and his servants wanted to at least pull up the weeds right away, but this man is wise and living according to the dynamic of God's love.

He doesn't retaliate. He doesn't even try to pull up the weeds. It would have been very difficult, and this is why the enemy used this particular kind of weed. The weed that is described in the gospel is one that as it begins to grow looks very much like the wheat crop.

So if you were trying to get rid of the weed, you'd get rid of a lot of your own wheat and the enemy would have prevailed. But the man doesn't get angry, doesn't go to retaliate. He says, "Wait." When the weeds have grown and the wheat has grown, we can harvest both, and look what happens.

Instead of one crop, the crop of wheat, he has two -- the weeds can be tied into bundles and kept as fuel. So he has taken what the enemy has done and in a way, turned it into something good, and that's how the reign of God can work. If we don't give in to hatred of our enemies, if we don't always try to retaliate right away, if we learn to respond with patience and even with love for those who hurt us, the reign of God then begins to happen.

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I'm sure every one of us can begin to think of ways in my individual life where if I began to act according to the way of Jesus, I could break a cycle of violence, a cycle of hatred, and begin that dynamic of love.

So we need to listen deeply to that parable and try to bring it in to our lives. The other two parables also are ways to help us understand what the reign of God is like. The mustard seed -- very, very tiny, you can hardly see it, but then it becomes a huge tree -- everybody will notice it. Jesus is saying, my community, if we live according to the reign of God, the community of disciples will be visible, people will see.

Remember how we spoke about the first disciples, the early Christians? Their enemies and those around them said, "See how the Christians love one another." They were noticed because they reached out in love.

We might ask ourselves, How much have we noticed? Not that we want notice for our own benefit and to be praised, but rather that we're showing people around us and the world around us that God is love, that the reign of God is a dynamic reign of love.

We ought to be visible in that way. We ought to be working as a community of disciples of Jesus, against violence, against war, against hatred, and be seen and make a difference.

The third parable too is clearly a way that Jesus tries to help us understand what the reign of God is like. You've heard me before, I think, talk about the Jesuit priest from El Salvador who was murdered back in 1989 because he and the others at the University of Central America in El Salvador were trying to change

the unjust structures in that country, trying to bring about a reign of justice, love and peace. They were murdered.

They had been criticized before because of what they were doing, but Father Ellacuria, the director of the university, explained, "Look, we are a people of the Gospel, a Gospel that is good news, and that calls us to transform our world into as close an image of the reign of God as possible," transform our world like the yeast in the dough.

It transforms that dough and that's what we are supposed to be doing as the community of disciples of Jesus -- transforming our world into as close an image of the reign of God as possible. That would mean a world where everyone had a full human life, where the goods and resources of the earth would be for all and not for a few.

A very quick example right now -- what's going on between the congress and the president, trying to develop a budget?

There are those who say: "Cut all the programs, shrink our government, cut education, cut help to the poor, cut the food-stamp program, cut the program that enables people without work and people looking for every opening in this country right now. Enable them to survive somehow, cut all of that."

That's what some people are saying. Others are saying, "No, change the tax structure so that one percent pays a far higher percentage of their taxes than they do now, and those who don't have very much get a tax break."

Which side do you think Jesus would be on? Didn't he always go with the poor? In fact, he was criticized; he welcomed the poor to his table. He went and was with them. Where would Jesus be now? How would he be trying to transform this world in which we live in order that everyone could have a full human life?

As we think about these parables of Jesus and try to bring them into our own lives, it may be very important to again hear what St. Paul says: When you pray, don't just be using a lot of words. Let God's spirit begin to speak in you, and that spirit will speak to you, and that spirit will speak through you and perhaps guide you then, in making the reign of God become a reality in our world.

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

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