

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Aug. 31, 2006 | The Peace Pulpit

I am mindful as I'm sure many, maybe most of you are also mindful, that we're coming to the end of the summer. To the end of a beautiful season of the year. Endings are always difficult. I feel sad that summer is coming to an end. But when there's an ending, usually there's also a beginning. And so we do have new beginnings happening. School is getting underway. Every day the teachers are coming, preparing their rooms looking forward to this new school year. As a parish, we're experiencing a certain ending, but also there will be a new coming as we transition into a different way of being St. Leo's parish. Another renewal, is Wynetta, this morning coming into our community, renewing and deepening her faith which has been there for a long time but now becoming part of our parish family and the whole Catholic community, a beautiful new beginning.

The scriptures, I think, suggest to all of us, that it's a moment for each of us to renew within ourselves, our own commitment to follow God in Jesus. To make a renewal of our faith life. Faith life is always something that is very radical. It's a radical choice that we make. And so we ought not to make it casually, but with only careful prayer and strong conviction, because it really is radical.

This first lesson today, this is exactly what was happening with the chosen people. It was a time of ending for them. Moses had died and was buried and now they were beginning a whole new phase of their life with God, their relationship with God. And so Joshua calls them all together. He summoned all the tribes of Israel to the shrine at Shechem. The elders, the leaders, the judges, all the people, together they presented themselves before God. Joshua reminds them of all that God has done. How God had been part of their lives, how they had entered into covenant with God. But now there is a danger that they might fall away. Moses is gone. They're entering a new phase of their relationship with God and so Joshua challenges them:"

"Fear God. Be sincere and faithful in serving God. Set aside those gods your ancestors worshipped in Mesopotamia and Egypt. Serve only Yahweh."

Then he goes on to say:

"As for me, I and my household will serve Yahweh."

Then the people respond:

"May God not permit that we ever abandon Yahweh to serve other gods."

And Joshua asked them very formally:

"Will you be able to serve Yahweh? Yahweh is a holy God, a jealous God."

The people replied:

"No, may it not be as you suggest, we will serve Yahweh."

And Joshua said:

"You yourselves are witnesses that you have chosen Yahweh, to serve God and God alone."

They answered:

"We are witnesses."

They accepted renewal of their covenant and do it in a very public way.

The gospel lesson as you easily understand was a challenge of faith. There were those who chose to leave, to walk away from Jesus. That's a choice that any one of us has at any time. To say, "No, I will not follow." Or we, as we're urged to do by the example of the chosen people and by the twelve in today's Gospel. We can choose to do like Peter says, say to Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."

So we are asked to make this radical choice in faith. And today we can in this liturgy, each of us, make that radical choice once more: We will follow God as God is revealed to us in Jesus. That's the crux of our whole life, as disciples of Jesus. That we will follow God's ways as they're revealed in their fullness in Jesus.

I think it's important too to notice how, when Peter is challenged, and the other disciples, it's a very personal thing. Jesus says to them, "Will you go away, will you leave me?" See he doesn't ask them to take a list of doctrines or anything like that and say, "I believe, I believe, I believe." No, he says, "Will you follow me?" And that's how Peter answered, "Lord, where else would we go? To whom would we go? You have the words of everlasting life. Of course we will follow you!" And that's what our radical choice is -- to follow Jesus. Which of course, means we have to come to know Jesus, don't we. We have to read the scriptures carefully, reflect on everything Jesus says. How he acts, the way he is, and then say, "Yes, we will follow Jesus."

The second lesson today, as I mentioned, it's one that sometimes disturbs people because it has that line in it that people find difficult, "wives be submissive to your husbands." Because it goes on, too, the husband is the head of the wife and so on, and we've heard fundamentalists' interpretation of that passage that demean women, put women down. And in our own Catholic church community, women have been forced to live out in a lesser role than men in terms of leadership and so on. But the passage is really a radical, you might say, subversion of the culture from which Paul was writing, the culture of the Roman Empire, the culture that was expressed in Roman's law, whereby women had no rights. Women were owned by their husbands as property, and the husband could do anything in Roman law to his wife, even kill the wife and it wasn't a crime. She was simply his property. What Paul is doing in writing to the Christians at Ephesus, he's saying, now in Jesus, it's different. He starts off the whole passage by saying to those Christians and he's talking to all of them, "Defer to one another as to Jesus." In other words, reverence one another, respect one another. He's speaking to married people in this instance, this is about the sacrament of marriage. The principal that guides Paul in his writing is: Defer to one another as you would to Christ. In other words, it's a call to equality. Let all submission to one another become obedience to Christ. Not just women to men, not just wives to husbands, but to one another as you would give definite obedience to Jesus.

Even when Paul says, "the husband is the head of his wife," and again, remember that he's writing within the culture of the Roman Empire, and he's trying to undermine that, he says, OK, if you want to use that cultural term, well then remember, that as the head, you must be as Christ is the head of the church. And Paul goes on to

say, how Jesus totally gave himself for the church, became, in that marvelous example that we know from the Last Supper, the servant of the whole community when He got down and washed their feet. Jesus says, if you want to be the head, you become the servant. That's so typical of Jesus, how he overturns, undermines, the culture of the world that infects all of us, that was very strong within the Roman Empire and still is strong to a large extent in our own culture. Jesus by his radical speeches, undermines that. All of us then are called to be equal with one another in the community of disciples. There aren't some who are over others; it's a community of equals. That is so clearly what Paul is trying to get across to the people at Ephesus. Defer to one another as you would to Christ, women to men, men to women. There's equality. That's a tremendous, radical change in that culture.

If we carry that out today, and we should, of course, if we are going to make this choice to follow Jesus, renew our covenant with God through Jesus, well then we have to commit ourselves to be the servants of one another within married life. How beautiful every married life would be if husbands and wives really related to one another as Jesus does to us, the church, giving himself totally for us.

If we related to each other, not just within the form of married life, but in our whole parish family and our parish community, if we really had deference for one another as for Jesus, wouldn't our relationship with each other always be filled with love and goodness? We wouldn't be backbiting; we wouldn't be gossiping, we would be putting people down -- if we had deference, respect, reverence for one another as Jesus does for us and we do for Jesus. That spirit should permeate every relationship we have. That we look upon other people, the poor in our midst, as we would look upon Jesus, we would have reverence for them, deference for them. How rich our community would be when each one of us renews that commitment to be as Jesus calls us to be, followers of him, having love for one another, as he loves us, giving ourselves to one another as he gave himself for us.

I suggest that we can take this one step further, going beyond our parish family, what we do within our family with one another and how we relate to one another and to those around us in our immediate community. But just like, as Paul was undermining the Roman Empire which did not value women at all, except as objects, we have to try to undermine the empire in which we live. An empire that is so clearly committed to violence and to war. The reason this occurs to me is that I got an e-mail this week from a person living in Baghdad. Now his English is not perfect, but it's very clear. He says:

"I have now been back in Baghdad since three weeks. It looks not three weeks but it looks like years. The situation is so bad. Not safe at all. Baghdad looks like graveyard of hell. The U.S. military close all the streets no cars pass through. No one can go from city to city. In Baghdad even no people go to work for 4 or 5 days. The tanks every where, and the police cars in front of every street and the fear in all eyes from the U.S. military and the police also from the killers and the thieves. The weather is too hot, my skin is burned and hurt me so much because of the sun and the hot.

The killing every where. It's the real hell. Before 5 days, three women kidnapped in front of the people and no one helped them. In Al Karada, I heard the people talk about the kidnappers, how they took the girl to the car holding guns, and how they were sorry that they couldn't help. Also there were police cars near the accident, but they are also scared to help. What kind of freedom or democracy that Bush gave to Iraq or the Middle East?

Baghdad is like hell in the day and the dark in the night. No electricity. No good water. Every thing is expensive more than you imagine. I don't know how the people can stand all that the government by supporting the Congress of U.S.A. killing the Iraqi slowly. Many children killed by the weather and the poverty and no oil for cars. The taxi took more then \$10 to pick one to 10 miles. It is horrible situation here."

That's what we've done to this country. Because we believe violence and war is the way to change the world. It is not the way that Jesus tells us to change the world. If only we would begin truly to follow the way of Jesus. Take that deference for one another and make it a deference for every person on the earth. A love for every person. A transforming of the world, not through violence, but through love. The way of Jesus. That's the radical choice that is being offered to us today through our scripture in this liturgy.

Perhaps Jesus is saying to all of us, "Will you also go away?" Is it too radical for you to follow the way of Jesus? If so, he's saying, go away. But if not, if we're ready to make that renewal of our faith, then we can be like Peter and say, "Lord, to whom shall we go, You have the words of everlasting life. And we will follow you."

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