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Thomas Gumbleton | Sep. 15, 2006 The Peace Pulpit

After our first lesson today, we sang a psalm with the response, "Praise the Lord my soul, praise the Lord my soul!" That's really what this liturgy of the Word is about, praising God and it reminds me of our mantra, which I thought perhaps we should say a couple of times today: GOD IS GOOD! [Congregation responds: ALL THE TIME!] Right! GOD IS GOOD! [Congregation responds: ALL THE TIME!]

Today if we look into the scriptures, we realize how good God is. In the first lesson, as I mentioned when I introduced it, the people were in exile. You think of the Middle East right now, this is the same territory. Babylon, that's Iraq, it's in shambles. And that's the way it was, back in the time of Isaiah. Not Iraq, but that's where the people were. Their own land was in shambles, and they had been driven out. For 70 long years, they had been living in exile, now God is going to bring them back. They never lost hope during all that time. They continued to believe and trust in God, and God is going to bring them back. Isaiah is overwhelmed almost with the way that he experiences this goodness of God. "Say to those who are afraid, 'Have courage, do not fear! See your God comes!' " Probably during that long time they had a sense, at least at times, that God was not in their midst. But Isaiah is saying, "No, God is with you! God is coming, God is bringing justice!" Then to try to emphasize this -- this really wasn't happening, but to show how extraordinary is the love and goodness of God -- Isaiah offers this description, which we just heard: "Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unsealed! The lame will leap as stags and the tongue of the mute will sing and shout!"

God is good. That is what Isaiah was telling the people. God is good, so never give up! Have courage, do not be afraid! We need to hear those too, because as we experience the violence, the war, the hatred that's going on in our world, we could give up, we could lose hope. We could be afraid. But not when God is good. And God is good. Always. We know that and this lesson reinforces that for us.

As we sang our response after the first lesson, the emphasis was on the first words of that Psalm 146, "Praise the Lord, my soul!" but as we go on into that psalm, we find out again how good God is. "Blessed are they whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in their God, maker of heaven and earth, the sea and all it contains. God is forever faithful! God gives justice to the oppressed, gives food to the hungry, and lets God's mercy show in all that God does. God lifts up those who are fallen, raises those who are beaten down."

See again, the psalmist is telling us God is good. God is good.

And even St. James -- although the challenge to us he puts so plainly -- "you focus your attention on the well dressed person, and you say to that person, come and sit in the best seat, while the poor person, you say to that one, stay standing or else sit down at my feet." James challenges us: Have you not, made a distinction between the two? Have you not judged using a double standard and based on appearances? But then James says, "Look brothers and sisters, did not God choose the poor of this world to receive the riches of faith and to inherit the kingdom which God has promised to those who loved God?" God is good because God does choose the poor of this world. They may seem poor in appearance, but their faith in God is real and strong. God chooses them. And so again we know how good God is because God is looking after the poor and is always with the poor.

The Gospel lesson too, of course, shows us how good God is. It also has a detail about the Gospel that perhaps we might not have noticed. This is one of the first times Jesus is spreading the Good News beyond the chosen people. God is good because God is looking out for all the people of the planet. All the peoples of the universe. God is looking upon all that God has made. And it's all good, and God is good. In today's lesson, God chose goodness by healing the man who cannot hear and who has trouble speaking. So he's able to proclaim, he's experience very deeply the goodness of God and so he begins to shout and cry out. And when we try to experience the sense that he had because we look into our own lives, we see how God is good to us, we will shout and proclaim too.

I mentioned at the beginning of Mass some of the things we celebrate today. Andy and Leslie as they begin their married life. What a joy, what a beautiful occasion that was yesterday. Saundra Ward back, Sam Brown back. God is good. God is working in our midst. The Mercy Sisters who have celebrated so many years of dedicated life, serving in the spirit of mercy and justice and for the poor. God is good. God is good in our community and today as we celebrate, it's important that we keep reminding ourselves of all the ways that we have experienced God's goodness and to give thanks and praise to God for God's goodness.

But then, as you might expect, there's also a challenge in today's lesson, especially if we look at the symbolism that comes forth through the first lesson, where the deaf people are made able to hear the mute are able to speak. That's repeated in the Gospel. You look a little bit further ahead in Mark's Gospel and you find where Jesus says to the disciples, "Do you not see or understand? Are your minds closed? Have you eyes that don't see and ears that don't hear?" God can open the ears of those who are deaf, open the eyes of those who are blind. But for those who are blind, physically, and certainly it's a challenge. We have Darryl here in our midst who is blind. It's a challenge for him, and we would that God would open his eyes, but for some deeper reason, God doesn't. But God is challenging every one of us to open our eyes to have eyes that are open, ears that listen.

For me, perhaps the challenge most of all, on this occasion, tomorrow, the fifth anniversary of the destruction of the Trade Towers in New York City. The destruction of part of the Pentagon, the crash of the plane in Pennsylvania. The fifth anniversary. And I have to ask, and I hope all of us would ask ourselves, have we really tried to open our ears and our eyes and try to understand why this happened. If you listen to our President, it's because they hate us. And so we go to war against Iraq and we waged war there now for over three years. Brought about death and destruction. But Iraq was not involved on 9/11. Fifteen of the nineteen who flew those airplanes were from Saudi Arabia. This past week when we hear about the 14 who have been transferred from secret prisons where they've been tortured to Guantanemo, not one of them is from Iraq. Nine were from Pakistan.

Why do these people plan and carry out acts of terrorism? Is it because they're envious of us, as the President suggest or are there deeper reasons? We need to try perhaps to open our eyes to see what those deeper reasons are, open our ears to hear.

Saudi Arabia, here is a country that we have supported with military supplies, we sell them mostly, but we supported a regime in Saudi Arabia that is corrupt. We have supported it for decades now. Many of the people of Saudi Arabia, this is a country ready to explode in revolution, but because of our support for the regime, that regime stays in power. It's an oil rich country of course, but most of the people are desperately poor, and they know why. We support a government that's corrupt, keeps them poor. Pakistan is a country that is also seething with revolutionary violence. There's a military dictator, and we support that military dictator. The people see and understand why they are oppressed, and so some of them lash out against us. Isn't that really the deeper reason why we are under attack? It's not just because they are jealous of us or want what we have. They know they're being oppressed and with the support of our government. But we won't listen to their cries for freedom, their cries for genuine justice.

And now we threaten the country of Iran. I can remember because I have personal experience, back in 1979, when I visited the hostages who were held by young students from Iran. Our country was outraged at this and it was an injustice and it was evil. But I remember very vividly, going into that U.S. Embassy on Christmas Eve night and spending most of the night, not just with the hostages, but two or three hours with the students who were holding the hostages. I was with two other ministers, we discussed with those students: Why are you doing this? Well, they told us why. It was because we have supported the Shah, the Pahlavi family, from 1953 when we overthrew their government, put in this tyrant and then supported him until they brought about a revolution in February of 1979. And then we gave the Shah protection. They wanted to bring him to trial. We would not allow it to happen because of course, in the trial, our complicity and our involvement in all that the Shah had done would come out. Just this week, one of those people who had been held by the secret police under the Shah, a former high ranking Iranian official, wants Americans to see his cracked thumb nails. They were torn out, he said, after Washington's friend, Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, put him in prison in the 1970s. The article goes on to say how he was tortured by a secret police whom we supported. Is there any doubt why people like this man and others who suffered oppression because of us, might want to lash out against us? But we're not able to hear it.

I remember when I came back from Iran in '79, we were invited to speak to the Secretary of State and members of the State Department. We tried to share with them what we had heard. And they listened, but not really. We were thought of as dupes, we had been taken because we really tried to listen to the pain and the hurt and the sense of injustice that these people had experience. And our government still it seems will not listen. But each of us, I think has an obligation to try to listen deeply to what is happening in our world. We must try to see where our country has been involved in a very hurtful way against many countries. Overthrowing legitimate governments, supporting tyrants and military dictators. We have to allow ourselves to see and understand why then people might lash out against us.

If we can understand, if we listen, if we see and then we respond in an appropriate way, we have a chance to end this so called war on terror. It will end when we begin to understand the deeper reason and then do something to change those circumstances and bring justice into the world. And then we'll be able to bring peace into the world.

You and I have to begin to try to understand the best we can. Influence others, share the message about why it is happening. Try to influence our government to see more deeply, to listen more carefully, to try to hear the cries of the poor and the oppressed. Then we as a nation could expect to bring an end of the war of terror, bring an end to the violence and injustice that's going on in our world.

God is good and God gives us the opportunity to have our hearing healed, our eyesight restored, not just physically, but that deeper hearing and that deeper seeing. God would make that happen if we open ourselves to God's healing power. And as we spread what we learn, again, there is hope for our world. God is still with us, God is still good and through our efforts, God will help us to bring true peace into this world, to end our fear of terrorist attack. To end our fear that our world will be destroyed and to be able to live in genuine peace with great love for all our brothers and sisters. God is good, all the time.

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