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God is doing new things; we must be open to his will

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

Editor's note: This homily is from a Mass held March 17.

When I stand in this pulpit, it is impossible to miss the extraordinary banner that you have draped across the choir loft in the back of the church. As you leave this morning, or any morning, you, too, must notice those exciting words: "The Spirit is loose and she is wild." When I reflect on all the things that have happened here in St. [Lucie] Parish, I fully understand how that is true. The ministries of charity and mercy and love are so abundant here.

Then going beyond that to find the causes for structural injustice and working against those causes in trying to make justice really happen so everyone has a real opportunity to share in the goods of the world that God gave for all. Also, the enthusiasm and the joy and the celebration of the liturgy, the spirit of faith that is so clearly present here. Your faith supporting and connecting with my faith and with the faith of every other person -- it is an extraordinary experience of God being present through God's Spirit.

I suggest that that's how we will best understand today's Scripture readings, to understand that God is always working through God's Spirit. This becomes so clear in the readings, that God doesn't follow all of the old patterns all the time. God is working through the Spirit and that's why, in the first lesson today, St. Ignatius proclaims to the chosen people, speaking for God, "I am about to do a new thing. Now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it?" The new thing -- these are people to whom Isaiah is preaching who have been in exile for decades. They're disheartened. They're demoralized. They're failing to live up to their commitments to one another, to their community. They're losing their call. They're letting go of their call to be God's chosen people.

Fifth Sunday of Lent
Isaiah 43:16-21
Psalm 126:1-2, 2-3, 4-5, 6
Philippians 3:8-14
John 8:1-11
Full text of the readings

So God is saying to them, "Look! I am doing something new" -- a new thing in a very short time. God will bring about their deliverance in a way they would never have suspected; not through a new Moses

that God raises up as God did when the people were in slavery in Egypt. No. This time, God acts through a pagan ruler, Cyrus, the king of the Persians, who will conquer Babylonia and then arrange for the Jewish people to return. So God is doing something totally new, never in their experience before. They have to watch and be open and listen for it and be ready for this new way that God acts as God's Spirit works among them.

How could you miss the action of God's Spirit in the second lesson today? First of all, remember, Paul was the Pharisee of the Pharisees. He kept all of the 613 laws of the Torah faithfully. He was even among those who were persecuting, putting in jail, people who failed to live up to the Torah. Yet here, Paul is saying, "I regard everything as lost because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord. For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things. I regard them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him. Not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith."

Paul is saying that, "God has done something new in my life. All that went before, I can let go because now, as I enter into this new experience of God in Jesus, everything becomes new." Paul goes on: "I just want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection." He is opening himself to the Spirit, and God is working in new ways now. Paul is ready to be open to that, and God transforms his life. New things really begin to happen, and he can't wait until, as he says, "Forgetting what lies behind and streaming forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the Heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." Through the Spirit, God has transformed Paul, and Paul, being open to that Spirit, finds himself ready to act in new ways to relate to God in totally new ways.

We find in the Gospel lesson here, too, those elders who are trying to put Jesus in a difficult spot discover that God works through Jesus in new ways. If he accepts their command that he must assent to the stoning of this woman, he will lose the people that have followed him in such great numbers and with such enthusiasm. But if he refuses to go along and disobeys the law, which really does require that such a woman be stoned to death, then Jesus is subject to being brought to trial himself. Yet Jesus, because God's Spirit is working through him in new ways, manifests once more -- as we heard, in fact, in last Sunday's Gospel -- how God never stops loving any one of us. Remember the story of the two sons? God loved them both and was open to transforming their lives to the new workings of the Spirit.

God's love is ready for anyone who is ready to acknowledge their sinfulness. They don't have to be stoned or they don't have to do extraordinary penances of one kind or another. Simply be ready to receive God's love by acknowledging their need of that healing love. The young woman is certainly in that situation. Actually, even as the elders begin to reflect when Jesus challenges them -- "Whoever is without sin, throw the first stone" -- they, too, are simply acknowledging that they are sinners. They need God's healing. It will happen for them, too, because that is the way of God -- the way of love.

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Once we've opened ourselves to that love, God is there. God works in ever-new ways. We have to watch for those new ways, accept them and follow them. I hope that each of us, in our own personal lives, will try to find the way that God is working within my spirit, through that Spirit who is loose among us, ready to change any one of us. Be open. Acknowledge our need and God will transform us, as God made new ways for the chosen people of old, as God changed Paul's life so dramatically, as God brought healing and love to the woman taken in adultery. God can change us.

It also happens in the world around us, and I have just two quick things I want to mention. First of all, we

all experienced that extraordinary conclave a short time ago, and we have a new pope, Francis. It seems, as he begins to act as pope, the leader of the Roman Catholic church because he's bishop of Rome, he's speaking to us and showing us God's Spirit acting in new ways. It's symbolic, but it's so meaningful. He took the name Francis, one who committed his life under the power of the Spirit to following Jesus radically in simplicity of life, in giving up violence. He had been a soldier. He gave that up and followed only the ways of peace.

The pope took that name, obviously with discernment. He knew what the name would mean to people. But then he also began to act -- refusing to ride in the separate limousine, getting on the minibus. He refuses to wear the excessive amount of special robes, and so on. He wants, evidently, to be one among us, a leader who is also with the people. This is something new, something different, giving up the trappings of monarchy and wealth and acting with simplicity. So God is working in a new way. Perhaps we pray that this is only the beginning and that God will continue to work in new ways through Pope Francis and that the integrity of our Christian community can be restored, the integrity of our leadership within the Christian community can be restored; that new ways, new things, can happen through the power of the Spirit. So, it gives us hope.

Also, just this past week, once more I visited Haiti. This time, I experienced God working in new ways in what is one of the most violent areas in a slum area: 300,000 people in a very ugly slum area in the city of Port-au-Prince. I was with a group of teenagers who ordinarily would be tempted to go the ways of violence, join gangs and that sort of thing. Yet here they were, 75 to 100 of them, gathered in a room and doing centering prayer, learning to come to peace within themselves so they could spread peace in their community.

It's a program started by the Pax Christi group from Port-au-Prince. They're teaching these young people ways of nonviolence, ways of love, acceptance and tolerance. They call the program Sakala, and it really is bringing about new things. Extraordinary, profound change is coming, not from a violent revolution and overthrow of the system, but from people changing from within, letting the Spirit work within them. They will begin to bring about changes in their society so that, again, justice can be done for all, and this is spreading.

We went from this one group that's already been under way for about a year, and now one of the young people is a leader of that group. The leaders are young men who have grown up in Cite Soleil and they're saying, "We have to find a new way." So now, a second group is being started in another of the neighborhoods. There are 34 neighborhoods in City Soleil, and the hope is that they will begin to band together in this new approach of tolerance, acceptance and love. New things are happening, and it's extraordinary to experience that and the hope that it gives to the people living there.

So I want all of us to be aware of that, that everywhere in our church, God is doing new things. God can do new things within our lives. We must open ourselves to that Spirit, who is loose among us doing these wild and new things. Be open and God's reign will continue to expand and we will share in it ever more fully. God is doing new things. The Spirit is at work. Rejoice. Be open. Let your lives be transformed. Work for transforming our world to the reign of God.

[Homily given at St. Jude Parish, Port-au-Prince, Haiti. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. **Sign up here** to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

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