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Everything we get from the world is a gift from God

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

As usual, I think we will be able to listen most deeply and understand well the Scripture lessons of today if we remind ourselves of the context, especially of the Gospel lesson. A couple of weeks ago, you may remember, there was the story of Martha and Mary and Jesus coming to be with them. We learned from that what it means to be a true disciple. Mary was the one of whom Jesus said, "She is really being a disciple because she is listening," and a disciple is someone who listens and follows Jesus.

Then last Sunday, Jesus talked about one of the ways that are important in trying to follow Jesus, and that is the whole idea of hospitality. In fact, the first lesson last week was Abraham and Sarah showing extraordinary hospitality to some strangers that just happened to come by and needed a place to rest and be refreshed and fed and so on.

Then Jesus told the parable, or the story, last Sunday about the person who suddenly had visitors and found out they did not have enough in their home to feed and take care of the visitors, so this person goes to a neighbor and keeps on persisting until the neighbor who says at first, "Look, everybody in this place is asleep. Don't bother us." But the one who was in need doesn't stop, and finally we hear Jesus say, "This person will obviously get up and give what is necessary to take care of the visitors, to be hospitable, because otherwise the person would bring shame on himself and on the whole village." It's so important, Jesus is saying, to be hospitable, to welcome strangers, to draw people in, to share with them.

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Ecclesiastes 1:2; 2:21-23

Psalms 90:3-4, 5-6, 12-13, 14, 17

Colossians 3:1-5, 9-11

Luke 12:13-21

Full text of the readings

Today, Jesus teaches the same thing, in a sense, but from the opposite perspective: "Avoid greed of any kind." What's greed? Well, it's piling up goods like you hear in the story in the Gospel: having way more than we need, keeping it for ourselves. Avoid greed of any kind. Earlier in this Gospel of Luke, Jesus reminds us of what is a blessing. "Blessed are the poor. Happy are the poor. Woe to the rich." Do you hear that? Woe to the rich, those who have way more than they need and hold it to themselves; they're greedy.

But I think there's a problem that most of us probably sense: What does it mean to be too rich? Should everybody be desperately poor? Is that what Jesus means when he says, "Blessed are the poor"? Of course not. What Jesus is saying is, Yes, we all have a right to what we need for a full human life, but when we begin to accumulate a lot more than we need, then we're being greedy.

I think the contrast was made clear a couple of weeks ago when Pope Francis went to that tiny island off the southern part of Italy, Lampedusa, where rather a large number of people had died in a shipwreck. They were people who were fleeing North Africa; they were people in desperate need, fleeing poverty, fleeing violence, fleeing the impossibility of having a decent human life. They were looking for another chance.

Pope Francis decided, I'm going to go visit those people. When he did, he was giving an extraordinary example. He was saying, "Look, we should be welcoming these people. They're immigrants who need help. They are coming out of a desperate situation." But then he said, "But in our world today, a world where there's a globalized economy, where everybody is dependent upon everybody else, there's also a globalization of indifference." That's a huge part of the problem in our world.

About four-fifths of the world's people are in desperate poverty. One-fifth of the world's people have an overabundance of wealth. Of course, then, the ideal isn't to be desperately poor. No, the ideal is to have what we need and to be willing to share what is beyond our needs and also to try to find ways so that people aren't forced into poverty because of the way the economic system works so that so few have so much [and] so many have so little.

So as we listen to today's Scriptures, I think the first thing we should notice is how, in that passage of the book of Ecclesiastes, the author reminds us, "What profit is there for someone in all your work and heart searching under the sun? All your days bring sorrow; your work, grief. Wisdom and knowledge and skill must be used so that we do not leave all to someone who has not worked for it" because that's meaningless. The author says that if we pile up things for ourselves at one point, they're going to be nothing to us. They can't do us any good. In other words, we have to make sure we have our priorities in order, that we're not just seeking what is now, overlooking beyond now.

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Of course in the Gospel lesson, Jesus teaches that even more forcefully when he tells us the story today, and one of the important things as we listen is to notice how, in the story, it says, "A rich man and his land had produced a good harvest." The land had produced the harvest. Sure, he had to do something to work that land, but the land was in itself a gift. He had done nothing to provide that, nothing really to make the produce grow -- that was God's work. That's a very important underlying truth that we need to get hold of: All of this world is not something we brought about; it's a total gift from God. Everything we get from the world is a total gift from God. We sometimes, I think, have a tendency to forget that. We think that somehow, we've done it. No: God has given us the gift, and God brings about the produce, makes the land give fruit.

There's an encyclical letter that Pope Paul VI wrote back in 1967. It's been forgotten, I think, by most people, but it was on what he called "The Development of Peoples," how the world could grow in such a way that everyone would have a chance for a full human life. That encyclical gives us principles of Catholic social teaching that flow from the Scriptures, like the ones we heard today. For example, ... Paul writes, "The recent council" -- this is 1967, two years after the [Second] Vatican Council had ended -- "reminded us, 'God intended the earth and all that it contains for the use of every human being and people. All other rights whatsoever, including those of private property, are to be subordinated to this principle.' "

The principle: God gave this world for all; everyone has a right to what he or she needs for a full human life. And when we find such distortions in our world where so few have so much, it's injustice. It's wrong. It goes against the Catholic teaching, against the teachings of Jesus and the Gospel, especially today's Gospel. Then in that encyclical, Pope Paul goes on to quote from the first letter of John: "If you have the riches of this world and see your brother or sister in need and you close your heart to your brother or sister, how does the love of God abide in you?" In other words, can you say you love God if you neglect your brother or sister in the human family? We know the answer, of course, is no. The love of God can't be abiding in us if we don't love our neighbor as ourselves.

Further on, Pope Paul quotes St. Ambrose. This is something that I think we find difficult to accept: "You are not making a gift of your possessions to the poor; you are handing over to the poor what belongs to them." Did you ever think about it that way? If you give something to the poor, or if you neglect the poor person that's standing on the street corner begging, that you're depriving that person of what belongs to the person? Ambrose is very clear: "You are not making a gift of your possessions to the poor. You are handing over to the poor what is theirs, for what has been given in common for the use of all, you have arrogated to yourself."

This is what Jesus is talking about when he says, "Avoid greed of any kind." And it starts in very small ways. How can anyone in this world justify having billions and billions of dollars? How can we justify in our country the glamour that we build up about the rich? We list every year the 400 richest people in our country, like they've really made it, but that's wrong; they have accumulated to themselves what belongs to others. That's the teaching of Pope Paul VI in that encyclical, and it's a teaching that flows directly from our Scripture lessons today.

So all of us have to be aware of how, in little ways -- because it always starts in small ways -- that we begin to hold on to what we have as though it's really ours and not given for all if we have more than we need. Perhaps the most important thing for us is to leave this morning with a very deep awareness of what St. Paul says in our second lesson today: "If you are risen with Christ" -- in other words, if you share in the life of Jesus -- "seek the things that are above. Keep your eyes on what's going to be the fullness of your life if you live according to the way of Jesus now. Set your mind on the things that are above, not on merely earthly things, for you have died, your life is now hidden with Christ in God, and when Jesus, who

is your life, reveals himself in the fullness of his glory, you will also be revealed in that glory."

So we keep our eyes on Jesus and on the risen life that he shares with us and the things that we have of this world we use for the benefit of all, and not just for ourselves. That's how we will be learning to be a disciple of Jesus -- listening to his word and following it.

[Homily given at St. Hilary, Redford, Mich. 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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