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Through a community of believers our faith in God deepens, grows

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

In this passage that we have as today's Gospel, it seems to me, and others have suggested this also, that last Sunday's teaching was very difficult for us to accept. You remember, Jesus said so clearly, "Avoid greed at all costs."

Earlier in the Gospel, Luke had already put in Jesus' version of the Sermon on the Mount, "Woe to the rich, blessed are the poor." He makes it so stark, almost, and tells that parable about the rich person who had accumulated unlimited wealth and he didn't know where to store up all his wealth, so he was going to build new barns, store it all up, and then he could just relax and take it easy, rejoice and live fully. But in the parable Jesus says, "You fool! This night your life will be taken from you." Who's going to get all his wealth?

That led us to remind ourselves from the [Second] Vatican Council teachings that God made the world for all and not for a few, so when we have such a terrible distortion of the distribution of the goods of the earth, with so few having so much and so many having so little, it's wrong. Catholic social teaching tells us that we don't even have a right to what is beyond our use when others lack the barest necessities. Well, today's Gospel helps us to put the teachings of Jesus into a context -- not to diminish the strength of the teachings -- but at least to put it in a context that maybe helps us to find it more possible to integrate that teaching into our lives.

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Wisdom 18:6-9, 12, 2:21-23
Psalms 35:1, 12, 48-19, 20-22
Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-19
Luke 12:32-48
Full text of the readings

It's not in today's Gospel, but just before the passage of today, Jesus tells his disciples, "I tell you not to worry about your life, what we are to eat or about your body, what are we to wear, for life is more than food and the body more than clothing. Look at the birds of the air. They neither sow nor reap, they have no storehouses and no barns, yet God feeds them. God takes care of them."

I'm paraphrasing here -- God has given us in this earth everything we need for a full human life, so we really can relax a little bit and understand that whatever happens, God is there with God's supporting love. "Look at the wildflowers. They do not spin or weave, but I tell you, even Solomon with all his wealth was never clothed as one of these flowers. If God so clothes the grass in the fields, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will God clothe you, O ye of little faith?"

Jesus is trying to reassure us that we're in God's hands all the time, so if we direct our priorities so that we store up for ourselves what today's Gospel tells us, "an inexhaustible treasure in the heavens, where no thief comes and no moth destroys," and have our priorities straight, "where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." If we really are storing up for ourselves treasures in heaven by trying to live according to the way of Jesus, to listen to his teachings and to follow them, we have nothing to worry about. God's love will always be there to support us if we make our priorities according to the way of Jesus.

But as Jesus says, "O ye of little faith," he's referring to the fact that, yes, we do need faith to follow this way of Jesus, to hear his teachings, accept how stark they are in a certain sense, but how important it is then to have our priorities in the right place and to follow his way, but it takes faith.

Our second lesson today tells us at the very beginning of the lesson, "Faith is the assurance of what we hope for, being certain of what we cannot see." Faith is our trust in this love of God that is always there for us. Faith is assurance that what God has said, what Jesus teaches us, is the truth that will lead us to the fullness of life. But how do we acquire this faith?

The lessons today not only help us to understand how important it is to have our priorities directly, but also how we build on faith -- the faith that is passed on to us. One of the commentators on the Scriptures of whom I read this past week (a priest from the Belleville Diocese in Illinois, who writes regularly on the Scriptures, he's a scripture scholar, he teaches Scripture), he offers in a commentary today something that I think is very helpful in understanding today's lessons, especially the first lesson and the second lesson. He tells us, "If we grew up believing our only task in life was to get our souls into heaven, we won't appreciate the depth of insight in today's readings."

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He goes on, "Author and naturalist, Sue Halpern, probably understands these passages better than we do. In her recent book, *Four Wings and a Prayer*, she chronicles the migration of monarch butterflies from the northeast United States to their winter refuge in Mexico, then follows them as they trek back to the U.S. in spring. She reminds her readers that it takes at least seven generations to complete the entire cycle. No one butterfly lives for more than a few months; most survive only a month or less. Unlike migratory birds, each monarch experiences just a small part of the journey, but without the contributions of each, there would be no migration. The species would die out."

Now Fr. [Roger] Karban says, "Our sacred authors also presume each generation of our faith species has already done or will do something to help our community's ongoing faith migration. The authors of

Wisdom and the letter to the Hebrews reflect on what our ancestors unselfishly have done to help us reach this point in our journey. That's why, in that Book of Wisdom, our first lesson today, the author speaks about what happened just as the Jewish people were preparing for their exodus from Egypt; it was a time for their liberation. That night had been foretold to our ancestors and knowing in what promise they trusted, they could rejoice in all surety.

What the author is telling us is, they didn't really know where they were going, what would happen to them on the way, what would be the final outcome as they left the slavery of Egypt into the freedom of the children of God, but they believed. They trusted the word of God, so they left and made that journey, 40 years through the desert, until finally they came to the promised land. But that's only one example of how part of our human species, as we might call it, carries out the migration of faith.

In the second lesson today, in the Letter to the Hebrews, we read about the faith of Abraham and Sarah to start with, "By faith we understand that the stages of creation were disposed by God's word, and what is visible came from what cannot be seen. It was by faith that Abraham and Sarah, called by God, set out for a country that would be given to them as an inheritance." This author goes right back to Abraham and Sarah, points out their faith. This is actually generations before what our first lesson was about, when the chosen people had fallen short of trusting God and had been carried off in slavery into Egypt, so it goes right back to the beginnings, to Abraham and Sarah leaving everything where they were living, setting off for wherever God was to lead them, and it was only because of their faith, their trust in God.

Then the author of Hebrews goes on to talk about other people of faith in the Old Testament who carried on this message of God, believed in things that are not seen and had constant assurance of what we hope for generation after generation after generation. At the beginning of chapter 12, which isn't part of our lesson today, but which is a very important section I think, what a cloud of innumerable witnesses surround us. All of these people of faith down through the generations, down through the centuries, coming up to our own day, every generation having that faith, passing it on; not knowing the final outcome but having that assurance of what we cannot see, and hope in what we cannot see. Those people of faith are the people who have preceded us. We're the generation now that carries on this message of faith. Just as the migration of the monarch butterflies, generation after generation, keeps heading toward the goal, so does our human family, generation after generation after generation.

In the Letter to the Hebrews, of course, we end with those people that provided us the support of faith from the past, but we have to bring that right down into our own time -- the cloud of witnesses who followed after the time of Jesus, generation after generation, every century, people living by faith and trusting in the word of God, right down to our own times. We belong to a parish family. If we've been part of a parish family, active in its difficulties and sufferings, its joys and its hopes, we know that there are people of faith all around us who trust in the word of God, are trying to listen to that word, trying to follow it.

Perhaps in our own families, we've had people of faith who have passed it on to us. I don't often become personal, but I know in my own family, I remember so clearly my father every night before he went to bed, he knelt at his bedside and said the rosary, and often weekday mornings before he left for work, he would stop at church and assist at 6:30 Mass. I grew up in a family where it was clear, faith was being passed on to me and to all my brothers and sisters, because it was also from my mother.

One of the things I remember so clearly about her ... back in those days when you couldn't eat or drink anything from midnight and receive Holy Communion, you had to fast from food and water, drink, in our family there were a lot of us so my dad would take us to an earlier Mass and my mother would be home and prepare breakfast for us so when we got home, we would be able to eat. She would go to the last

Mass, which started at 12:30, without having eaten or had anything to drink since midnight, so that she could go to Holy Communion. Obviously, that kind of faith left a deep impression on me and all my brothers and sisters.

All of us have those people of faith who have gone before us and who show us the way to follow Jesus, listen to his word, and because we believe and trust in that word, we try to live according to the way that he teaches us. So it's our task, of course, to continue this. We're part of the human history living now. We're, in a sense, that part of the migration that is happening toward our heavenly fullness of life now, and we must try to be, as we're supported by those who went before us, be support to one another, be support to those who follow after us. It's so important that we try to live in faith, again, with the words from the Letter to the Hebrews, "with the assurance of what we hope for, being certain of what we cannot see," our faith will build the faith of others, and our faith will grow from the faith of others.

That's why it's so important to be part of an individual family, but also part of a parish family, a believing community of people who really do understand that faith is the assurance of what we hope for and makes us certain of what we cannot see. We pass on this faith to the next generation, as we continue, all of us and the whole human race, all of creation, moving forward to that end time where everything will come to its completion, where God will be all in all, as Paul says in one of his letters to the early churches, to the fullness of God's reign, when everyone will be filled with life and joy, peace and goodness and love forever.

I hope as we listen to today's message, we recommit ourselves to this relationship with God that we have through Jesus, which is the foundation of our faith, knowing Jesus, relating to God through Jesus. I hope that we will pray for its strengthening and that we will be faithful to what Jesus shows us and teaches us so that as our generation moves on, those coming after us will be people of faith who will continue to bring about the reign of God that Jesus has proclaimed, that reign of God that he says is near and will happen as we continue to carry on and live according to his way and his word.

[Homily given at House of Grace Catholic Worker, Philadelphia. 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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