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Humility helps us grow as disciples of Jesus

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

Editor's note: Bishop Thomas Gumbleton gave this homily Sept. 1.

As I mentioned to you at the beginning of introducing the Scriptures, Jesus has been teaching us over the last 10 or 12 Sundays various parts of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus -- how we are intended to be following him, following his way. Last Sunday, Jesus, in the Gospel, used the banquet as the point of beginning his discussion. But then at last Sunday's Gospel, Jesus described how extraordinary was what would happen at the fullness of time in the reign of God.

He says, "When people see Abraham and Jacob and all the prophets in the reign of God, you will sit at [the] table with people coming from east and west, from north and south; some who were among the last will be first and some who are among the first will be last." So Jesus is showing us what happens if we are faithful to being disciples of his: We will be brought into this marvelous festival of the heavenly kingdom. He uses the comparison of a joyful, very, very beautiful banquet, and that's at the end time.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is showing us how we live during the time when we help prepare for that heavenly kingdom. He uses again a gathering of a meal and this parable of the guests coming because he wants to teach us about humility. Of all the different things that Jesus has taught over the last 10 or 12 weeks to show us how to be faithful disciples -- things like avoiding greed of any kind, rejecting violence, things like being faithful and honest, all the virtues that we need in order to be disciples of Jesus -- and today, he teaches us again one of the most difficult.

In some ways, I guess, it probably doesn't seem too challenging to most people. It's not as hard, I guess, as trying to always work for justice, heal the brokenhearted, lift up the downtrodden. It's not as difficult as giving up violence, I would think, and yet it's a very challenging virtue, and one that as you hear from the Gospel today is most important if we're going to try to enter into the reign of God. One way, perhaps --

kind of going from a negative approach -- we can understand what humility is to learn from what is the opposite.

What happens at that banquet that Jesus is celebrating in the Gospel is very instructive. We may not have noticed, but when Luke tells how Jesus had gone to eat the meal in the house of the Pharisee, he was being carefully watched. See, they were out to try to accuse him of being unfaithful to God's law -- therefore people should not be following him -- so they're watching him. Then that's when this person comes in who is suffering. Jesus challenges them: "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" -- and you remember they had very strict Sabbath rules -- and so the Pharisees would not answer.

How can you say, "No, you can't heal this person," [though] the strictness of the law would say, "No, you can't do that on the Sabbath day." So Jesus shows up their hypocrisy. He says, "Who of you, if your donkey fell into a well, wouldn't try to get it out, even on a Sabbath day?" They can't answer him.

These so-called religious leaders are guilty of what is absolutely the opposite of humility: hypocrisy. Putting on a false front, try to pretend to be something you really aren't -- that's hypocrisy. In the 23rd chapter of Matthew's Gospel, you find how Jesus really condemns hypocrites where, among other things (and there's a whole list of things), "Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You devour widows' houses even while, for a pretense, you make long prayers."

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Or he says further on: "Woe to you teachers of the law, you hypocrites! You do not forget the mint, anise and currant seeds while you demand a tenth of everything; then you forget what is most fundamental in the law: justice, mercy and faith." And he goes on. He's trying to impress upon us [that] hypocrisy is something very evil. It's being, as we put in very ordinary terms, being a fake. You put on an exterior that doesn't reflect the reality of who you are.

Humility is just the opposite; it's being honest about who you are. It doesn't mean you put yourself down -- that isn't being humble, pretending you're not as good as you are, that you don't have certain qualities and abilities and so on -- but it's being comfortable and honest about who you are. Accepting that God has given you gifts and that you nurture them, try to become even better in moral and spiritual ways, and use the gifts that God has given to you. Never be ashamed to speak about them or to acknowledge that you have them so you have a self-confidence.

Yet what is so important: You recognize that they are gifts. God gave you the abilities that you have and you rejoice in them, but you always recognize the source of all that you have and you keep on trying to make yourself better, fulfilled; use the gifts and come to be all that God wants you to be. That's humility, and it can be a difficult virtue to understand, I think. First of all, we sometimes again try to put ourselves down -- pretend we're not this or that, capable of this or that -- instead of saying, "Yes, I can; I can. I am blessed. God has given me many gifts. I must nurture them and use them."

This may seem like a strange, strange example to bring up when we're reflecting on the Scriptures, but I think most of you would probably recognize who Miguel Cabrera is. [Editor's note: Miguel Cabrera plays baseball for the Detroit Tigers.] I see in him someone who is really humble in the right way. When he steps up to bat, you know he's very confident. He knows he can hit that ball out of the ballpark and he's ready to do it, and so he's very confident. He acknowledges his gifts and he keeps trying to improve and so on in this game of baseball.

It's not ultimately the best thing we can do, I mean in the sense of heaven and earth and heaven and hell, but he's perfecting the gifts that God has given to him with great confidence. He's not afraid to be aware of it, and in the very good sense, proud of it; he's never arrogant about it, though.

I remember a week or so ago, he was being interviewed by a reporter and reminded, "Look, you could get what they call in baseball the Triple Crown again this year. Best batting average, most RBIs, and most home runs." He's only behind in the home run category. "Are you going to try to beat out Chris Davis and get all those home runs?" Miguel simply said, "Well, wait a minute. He's young and he's having a good year; let him alone. See, I don't have to prove I'm better than he is. I'm being all I can be." That is humility.

It may seem strange again to draw the example of humility from something as ordinary as baseball and someone who is very proficient in baseball, but that really, I think, shows us how we have to be in our own life. Whatever gifts we have, we develop them; we use them; we rejoice in them; we thank God for them, acknowledging who the source of all our gifts truly is.

That makes us humble, and perhaps now, as we continue on our journey through this Gospel of Luke, this will be one more of the things that we try to develop in our everyday life: a way of being a faithful disciple of Jesus. We develop now the gift of humility: Be all that we can be, rejoice in all that we are, give thanks to God for the gifts we have.

Finally, if you want to determine a way: How can we continue to grow as disciples of Jesus? Develop all the gifts that he's been teaching to us, all the virtues he's been teaching to us during the last 10 or 12 Sundays how to be a disciple?

Well, in the letter to the Hebrews, which is our second lesson today before the passage that we had this morning, a couple of weeks ago there was the exhortation by the author saying, "Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus. If you want to grow in holiness, if you want to grow in virtue, if you want to be a real disciple of Jesus, keep your eyes fixed on him. Follow him, and you will become all that God wants you to be. You'll become a faithful disciple of Jesus."

[Homily given at St. Anne Church, Frankfort, 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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