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We must change our lives to follow Jesus

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

As I listen to the first part of today's Gospel where Jesus notices that great crowds are following him, I get a sense that he almost becomes alarmed: "Do these people really know what it means to be a disciple -- to follow me? Or are they just filled with enthusiasm and think of me as a wonder-worker, and they're coming for favors and blessings and not really discerning discipleship -- what it means to follow Jesus?"

So he makes what seems to be a kind of a harsh statement: "You have to love God more than father, mother, brother, sister, wife, family, children, or you can't be my disciple." At the very end, he says, "If you're not willing to give up your possessions to follow me, don't try to be my disciple."

So today, as we listen to the Scriptures, we're really being challenged to discover more deeply perhaps than we have up to this point what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. It's going to mean a deep turning in our lives. At the very beginning of Jesus' public life, he proclaims, "The reign of God is at hand. Change your lives," and this requires a deep profound change in our life because to follow Jesus, of course, is to follow God.

Our first lesson today gives us a kind of a good reason why we may not fully understand what it means to follow God. That passage from the Book of Wisdom this morning reminds us that God is totally other, totally different: "What person indeed can know the depths of God? The reasonings of mortals are unsure, our intentions unstable, for our perishable body presses down the soul. This tent of clay weighs down the teeming mind." The Wisdom person says, "This other -- it is hard enough for us to work out what is on earth, laborious to know what lies within our reach. Who, then, can discover what is in the mind of God?"

There's another place in the book of the prophet Isaiah where this same thing is proclaimed by the prophet in a way that maybe makes it even more clear how following God by following Jesus, everything has to be different. The prophet says, "Seek God while God is still to be found; call to God while God is still

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time
Wisdom 9:13-18b
Psalms 90:3-4, 5-6, 12-13, 14-17
Philemon 9-10, 12-17
Luke 14:25-33
Full text of the readings

near. Let the wicked abandon their way, the evil give up their thoughts. Let them turn back to God, to our God, who is rich in forgiving." Then here: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts; my ways are not your ways. It is God who speaks. Yes, the heavens are as high above earth as my ways are above your ways; my thoughts above your thoughts." God's wisdom is deep, different, other.

Maybe the most dramatic way that that is pointed out is by Paul when he writes to the church of Corinth and is urging these Christians to be faithful in their following of Jesus. He says: "The language of the cross -- what Jesus preaches -- may be illogical to those who are not of the way to the fullness of life. But those of us who are on the way see it as God's power to heal, to make whole, to bring God's saving love into our lives; the logic of the cross."

In Paul, further on in that same place in the first chapter of the first letter to the Corinthians, [he] says, "Look, here am I preaching of crucified Christ -- a crucified Christ, one who rejected violence even to defend himself, who gave himself over to death out of love, responding to hatred and violence with love. Here am I preaching of crucified Christ to so many of the Jews, a scandal that they cannot get over; to the pagans, madness."

Responding with love to hate? That seems to be a scandal's stumbling block. How could God be a God weak as Jesus was on the cross or to the so-called wise people? It's simply madness. Anyone would be crazy to do what Jesus did, and yet Paul says, "But the Christ is the power and the wisdom of God as he's hanging helpless on the cross, loving and forgiving his enemies. He's showing forth the power and the wisdom of God." Paul concludes, "For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom. God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

Obviously, we have a long way to go to probe the depth of the wisdom of God, even as we see it lived out and taught by Jesus, who is the visible image of the invisible God. So when we choose to follow Jesus, we're choosing to enter into a way that expresses this profound -- for us almost impossible to understand -- wisdom of God, to follow the way of Jesus. Today, we have to do what Jesus says: Step back for a moment; look, pray, discern, discover what it means to be a disciple; how it has to bring about a radical changing within our lives.

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Our second lesson, Paul's very personal letter to his friend, Philemon, gives us a quite extraordinary example of the kind of overturning within our lives that has to go on. The story is this: Onesimus, who had been a slave of Philemon, has come upon Paul in Ephesus, where he's in prison and has become a helper to Paul, and Paul has instructed him. He's become a disciple, baptized, born into the life of Jesus, and now Paul is sending him back to Philemon, but with a letter urging Philemon not to see Onesimus as the slave that he was, but as a brother baptized into the same life of Jesus that Philemon lives, that Paul lives.

The institution of slavery at that time was the law of the land; slaves had no rights. Philemon could put Onesimus to death for having escaped, and Paul is saying, "No, everything is different now because you are a follower of Jesus. Onesimus is a follower of Jesus." As Paul wrote later to the church of Galatia, "In Jesus, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male or female, rich or poor. All are one. In the whole human family, we become one when we follow Jesus," so there cannot be a slave.

That's not a possible relationship any longer for those who follow Jesus. Philemon is faced with a challenge. We never know whether -- in history, there's no follow-up on this, so we never know: Was he

able to accept the challenge to act against what were his legal rights -- not his human right, but legal right? Was he able to say, "No, and I will follow Jesus instead." That's the kind of radical turning around in one's life that a disciple of Jesus must confront.

We have, just within the past couple of weeks, been challenged once more by what's happened within our own countries. We celebrated the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech, with that huge outpouring of people in 1963 demanding changes in arduous laws and social structures that allowed for such -- of slavery going far enough back -- but even after slavery, segregation, discrimination, lack of full rights for people simply because of their race.

We've had to make a lot of changes in our minds, our hearts, our attitudes, and gradually in our laws. We still have some ways to go, but again, that's an example; but honestly, the most important example for us right now is what is happening in the Middle East and our threat to go to war. Can that be the way of Jesus? The way of one who refused to respond to hate with hate, to violence with violence, or mostly follow and find another way?

Well, in fact, Pope Francis has issued a very strong challenge to all of us to understand more deeply what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. He published this statement, and this is only a very small part of it: "With utmost firmness I condemn the use of chemical weapons. Yes, of course, I tell you that those terrible images of recent days are burned into my mind and heart. There's a judgment of God and of history upon our actions, which are inescapable -- that judgment of God and of history on such actions."

But then Francis says, "Never has the use of violence brought peace in its wake. War begets war; violence begets violence," and that is the truth. How can we be so blind to think that by going to war, we can heal the violence that has already been done? Further on, Pope Francis says, "I exhort the international community to make every effort to promote clear proposals for peace in that country without further delay -- a peace based on dialogue and negotiation for the good of the entire Syrian people."

"May no effort be spared in guaranteeing humanitarian assistance to those wounded by this terrible conflict, in particular those forced to flee and then many refugees in nearby countries. May humanitarian workers charged with the task of alleviating the sufferings of these people be granted access so as to provide the necessary aid. We must bring healing, not violence." That's what Pope Francis is saying.

Finally, he says, "All men and women of goodwill are bound by the task of pursuing peace. I make a forceful and urgent call to the entire Catholic church." He's asking us today: Look at what it means to be a disciple of Jesus and insist that our government give up the way of violence. It's a way of foolishness; it's a way that only begets more violence. Find the way of peace. Reject this call to violence and to war. It's our duty as disciples of Jesus.

Pope Francis makes that so clear -- appealing to us, the community of disciples of Jesus throughout the world. But also notice if you had the chance to hear this statement or see it, he goes on to say his appeal is also to every Christian of other confessions as well as to followers of every religion and to those brothers and sisters who do not believe.

Look at it in human terms: Peace is a good which overcomes every barrier. It belongs to all of humanity. Certainly today, as we listen to Jesus telling us to take stock of what it means before we say, "Yes, I will be your disciple," this is part of what we must discover, discern and try to follow: that we know a Jesus and, if we choose, will follow a Jesus who says no to violence, no to war -- war never again.

The challenge is real; these Scripture lessons today confront us very directly. Are you willing to make that choice to be a disciple of Jesus? Are we willing to bring about the changes in our lives, in our attitudes

and our thoughts and in our actions that will make us authentic followers of Jesus who rejected violence for any reason, who taught us only to respond to violence with love, to respond to hatred with love, never with violence or hatred? This, I think, is the most challenging part of what it means to disciple.

So perhaps today, as we listen to these Scripture lessons, as we enter into the Eucharist -- unite ourselves with the Jesus who gave himself over to death out of love for all of us and out of a desire to show us the way to peace -- that during this Eucharist, we will pray that we can make that choice that we do want to be disciples of Jesus, and that we will try to change our lives and follow him faithfully, fully, authentically.

[Homily given at Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi, Santa Fe, N.M. 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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