NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

It's time a healing took place in our church

Thomas Gumbleton | Jan. 31, 2014 The Peace Pulpit

As we begin this account in Matthew's Gospel of the public life of Jesus, at the very beginning, we are challenged directly by Jesus: "Change your lives, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand -- change your lives." The word is one that means a profound reordering of our lives -- a 180-degree turn, a change in our value systems. The reign of God or the kingdom of heaven -- this is something that Jesus is beginning to proclaim.

It's important that we get a sense of what Jesus means by this kingdom of heaven. First of all, it has nothing to do with the afterlife. We might think, "The kingdom of heaven -- that's where we go after we die." No; what it refers to is the reign of God, the reign of God throughout all of creation -- on our planet, on our earth, in our lives. It refers to God working effectively in our everyday lives right here and now.

It has to do with our relationship to God that we enter into God's ways, God's thoughts. As the prophet Isaiah puts it in one of his proclamations, "My ways are not your ways, my thoughts are not your thoughts. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways, my thoughts above your thoughts." God's ways are totally different. If we enter into the reign of God, then we begin to deepen this relationship of God so that we learn his ways, understand God's thoughts, make them our own insofar as we can, so that we live according to what God's will is for us and for all of creation.

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time
Isaiah 8:23-9:3
Psalms 27:1, 4, 13-14
1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 17
Matthew 4:12-23
Full text of the readings [1]

The reign of God is promised to us in many ways. In fact, in today's first lesson, we're learning what the reign of God is, and God is showing it to us because the first lesson shows a time when God has brought about a tremendous change for God's chosen people. They had been in exile, driven out of their own land; it had been destroyed. Isaiah sees where there was anguish, but the darkness will disappear.

God has afflicted the land of Zebulon and the land of Naphtali, but in the future, God will confer glory on the way of the sea, on the land beyond the Jordan. Isaiah goes on to say that the people who walk in darkness have seen a great light. A light dawned on those who live in the land of the shadow of death. "God, you have enlarged the nation, you have increased their joy. They rejoice before you as people rejoice at harvest time."

It's a time of joy, fulfillment of life, of happiness, of peace. This is only one description within the Scriptures of what the reign of God will be. There's another one that Jesus uses in his first public appearance in the synagogue at Nazareth in Luke's Gospel, where Jesus proclaims the words of Isaiah: "The spirit of God is upon me. God sends me to bring good news to the poor, to give the blind new sight, to heal the brokenhearted, to set the downtrodden and the oppressed free, and to bring about God's time of Jubilee."

A time when everyone shares in the goods of the earth that God intended for all. A time when there's peace and harmony among all peoples and among all creation. A time when we respect the planet as God's gift to us -- we nurture it, we take care of it, and we take care of each other. A time of fullness of life -- that's the reign of God. Again, in order to make that reign of God break forth in my life, in our parish life, in our civil life, we have to repent, change our lives, and be converted to God's ways.

There are many ways that we could begin to think about how we need this conversion as individuals, as our

church, as a community of people, and in our civil life. Probably the most profound way, in a way that seems quite simple, the words of Jesus when he spoke to his disciples so lovingly at the Last Supper: "My one commandment, the one commandment of all that I've been teaching: Love one another as I have loved you."

If only we could make love be the total expression of our lives -- love one another as I have loved you -- that would be unconditional love. Jesus doesn't demand anything of us before he loves us. Jesus loves us and loves us first. It's unlimited love. Whoever lays down his life for another -- there is no greater love than this. That's what Jesus did. In concrete ways, this changing our lives and living according to the way of Jesus is expressed in a way that all of us, I'm sure, are familiar with in the first letter of St. Paul to the church at Corinth.

Paul describes the greatest of all gifts: the gift of love. "Love is patient, love is kind, without envy, it's not boastful or arrogant, it's not ill-mannered, nor does it seek its own interest. Love overcomes anger, love forgives offenses, does not take delight in wrong, but rejoices in truth." You know, you could almost use that as an examination of your conscience each day, couldn't you -- all of us? Love is kind, gentle, careful, sensitive and thoughtful.

It's patient -- not being upset over little things that don't really matter. Maybe most of all, in that list of things that Paul writes about love would be that love forgives all offenses, reaches out in reconciliation. That's what our second lesson is about today, really, where Paul is pleading with the church at Corinth because they're divided. They've offended one another. They've set up factions. "I'm for Apollos," and "I'm for Paul," and "I'm for Jesus." Paul says, "Is Jesus divided?" Jesus is one.

Jesus must be the one who binds us all together. We don't break up into factions and split from one another over hurts, offenses, and so on. We're quick to forgive. In fact, in a profound expression of what his values are in what we call the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said at one point, "As you heard that it was said of old, 'Do not commit murder, do not kill,' but now I tell you, whoever gets angry with a brother or a sister will have to face trial.

"Whoever insults a brother or sister deserves to be brought before the council. Even if you are about to offer your gift at the altar and there you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift in front of the altar, go at once and make peace with your brother or sister. Then come and offer your gift." What Jesus is asking here is something that is desperately needed in our church today.

If there's been an offense against another, we go first and be reconciled. What I'm referring to is something that became very prominent in the news this week. It was reported on national news that the Chicago archdiocese, because of court order, released the personnel files [2] on priests who had abused victims. Over the decades, these priests have been sheltered and then moved from one parish to another, and for a long time, never really held accountable.

Now finally, the files come out, and it's clear that the bishops were much more concerned about protecting the good name of the church, preventing what they call scandal. They did such things as recently as the year 2000. Cardinal [Francis] George wrote a letter to a priest in prison whose prison sentence he was seeking to reduce, and he writes, "It would be a great fulfillment of the millennium spirit to see your captive heart set free."

The cardinal was saying how marvelous it would be if this priest would be released from jail. But there's no letter to the victim. There's no letter going to the victim, saying, "Yes, we need to be reconciled and go and be reconciled," with the perpetrator coming, admitting the guilt, and asking forgiveness. The victims in these cases have just been ignored. Further back, a priest wrote to Cardinal [Joseph] Bernardin from jail, "How full of shame I feel for having betrayed you and the archdiocese."

No shame or sense of having to make reconciliation with the person whom he abused or the many people he

abused. There's been a big gap in what is happening in the church and what Pope John Paul II called, "A cancer on the body of Christ" -- the sex abuse scandal. We still haven't gotten to the real way and the only way that this healing could take place. The victims or survivors are still treated as though they're adversaries.

People still say they only want the money. They don't recognize these are people who have been profoundly hurt, who have been denied the real acceptance of what they say happened to them. The priests deny it, the bishops hide it, and even if the person tries to forgive, there's no one there to receive the forgiveness. There can't be reconciliation until the one who has perpetrated the harm comes, as Jesus says in the Gospel, "Go first and be reconciled with your brother or sister, then come and offer your gift."

We have failed in this terrible cancer on the body of the church -- failed to bring about the healing that is still so much needed for the thousands of people around the world who have been abused and then denied a real chance for reconciliation, not recognized as the ones who have been hurt. My thought is that we, as a community of people, followers of Jesus, trying to change our lives and live the gospel of love, must do what we can first of all, in changing our lives to live out that commandment of Jesus -- love one another as I have loved you -- and spelled out in Paul's letter to the Corinthians.

Also, to bring about healing in our church, we as God's people must demand that our leaders be forthright in acknowledging the failures of themselves and those who perpetrated crimes and reach out to the survivors, recognize that they have been profoundly hurt. It's not that they want money; they want to be recognized that this did happen and that they're wounded, they need healing, they need love from our church and from those who perpetrated the crimes against them.

I don't know if we can make this happen. It's still only through legal efforts that these personnel files come out. It has almost always been the case that bishops have been forced to bring about settlements. They've fought through the courts.

It's time that this healing took place in our church. So perhaps on this Sunday when we reflect on the call of Jesus to change our lives, each of us needs to look into [his or her] personal life -- how must I change it to live according to God's ways and God's thoughts; not my ways, my thoughts, but God's ways, loving one another.

Also as a church, work for the healing, demand that our bishops acknowledge what we've done to individual survivors and bring about the acknowledgement of the sin on the part of the perpetrator so that the person who has been wounded can be healed by forgiveness, by giving forgiveness. It could happen. It will happen if we undergo this conversion within ourselves and within our church.

I pray that somehow, we will really listen deeply to what Jesus calls us to today and try, deeply for ourselves as individuals, and in any way we can, to bring about a change in our community of disciples, in our church, so that the reconciliation that Paul is talking about in our second lesson today can happen within our church at this moment in the deepest and most profound way possible.

Then the reign of God will burst into greater fullness in our midst because the reign of God is at hand. We only need to change our lives, follow God's ways, and the reign of God will happen. The reign of God will be something I will experience -- the peace and the joy, the goodness of God. Truly, I hope each of us goes home with these words ringing in our heart and ringing in our ears -- change your lives and follow Jesus.

[Homily given at a private celebration in Detroit. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. Sign up here [3] to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

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