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We need to be convinced that God is always in our midst

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

Is God really in our midst or not? Is God really here among us right now or not? Sometimes, we ask that question in moments of great distress when we have suffered some terrible tragedy or we have fallen away from God in some way. We wonder, Is God really with us? How could this have happened?

That's what was taking place in the first lesson today, when those former slaves in Egypt were trekking through the desert and found a place where they did not have water, and they were desperate. "Is God in our midst or not? Is God going to let us die here in the desert? Why would we ever leave Egypt if that's the only reason -- we come into the desert and we die of thirst?"

But there's something strange about this, and it's probably true of most of us, too. When everything's going fine, when things are going along very smoothly, people don't say, "Where is God? Why is this happening so fortunately in my life?" At that point, we don't say, "Is God in our midst?" We take for granted all that God has given to us.

The first thing we must learn from today's Scriptures, I think, is to be aware that God is in our midst, and God is always in our midst because we couldn't even exist if God didn't draw us into being out of love. There would be no universe; there would be no world like ours. None of us would be if God hadn't drawn us into existence, and every instant that we exist is because God is sustaining us in existence. It's God's love that is always with us.

And that time in the desert, the chosen people, after some effort, did find water, even there in that arid place, that dry place. So they were reassured that God is in their midst. Well, we ought to be aware that God is always with us, within us, holding us in being, loving us, supporting us, guiding us. In a more powerful way, we see this in the Gospel lesson.

Third Sunday of Lent

Exodus 17:3-7

Psalms 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9

Romans 5:1-2, 5-8

John 4:5-42

Full text of the readings

Jesus, in this incident at the well in Samaria, comes to this woman who is in dire straits, really. Her life has been shattered. You don't have five broken relationships without going through a lot of pain and suffering, and she is one who doesn't think very highly of herself. Why would Jesus speak to her? she wonders.

In fact, at that time, it wasn't only because Jesus was reaching out to her, but he spoke to her. The law forbade that; a man doesn't publicly speak to a woman and, especially in this case, there's a religious distinction, too. She's a Samaritan; to the Jews, that's a heretic. Jews don't associate with Samaritans. But here we see Jesus, reaching out, breaking down those barriers, engaging with that woman, enabling her to come gradually to know who he is -- the Messiah, the son of God, in our midst in a very extraordinary way in Jesus.

It's the son of God reaching out in love to this woman that breaks down those barriers, enables her to recognize him, and then to go off into the town and tell the other people that "I have seen the Messiah. He's told me everything in my life. He knows; he's a prophet." They come and they're converted because God, through Jesus, reaches into their lives, also.

That's what can happen to each one of us, if we open ourselves. We should be really deeply convinced God is in our midst right now. Through this powerful word, God is present to us. In the sacrament of the Eucharist -- the body and blood of Jesus is offered for us -- God is present. God is in our midst, and if we really let ourselves be aware of that, then what St. Paul says in that third and second lesson today would really be true for all of us: "By peace or by faith, our faith, our awareness that God is in our midst, especially in Jesus. By that faith, we have received true righteousness and we are at peace with God."

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Paul goes on to say how that happens because once we become aware of God's being in our midst, then the love of God is poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who is given to us. That happens; the love of God is poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who is given to us. Paul says, "Now when you think about that, what a gift that is, that God is in our midst in such a personal way with God's very life poured into us, and see how this love of God is manifested for us."

Paul says, "For while we were still sinners, Jesus died for us, and we have become just through his blood. With much more reason now, Jesus will save us from any condemnation." What Paul is emphasizing, and he says this, that someone might give their life for a truly good person, but when Jesus poured forth his love for us from the cross, we were sinners. Yet God reaches out; he loves us, draws us into his life, because the Holy Spirit is poured into our heart through the love of God.

So as we leave the church today, I hope we might remind ourselves to ask that question: "Is God in our midst?" And then with deep faith say, "Yes, I know God is in our midst, because the love of God has been poured into my heart through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to me."

[Homily given at St. Hilary Parish in 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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