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Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Jan. 22, 2009 The Peace Pulpit

I thought it might be appropriate today to begin our reflection on the scriptures by sharing with you a brief anecdote. It's a very brief scene from a famous play, written by George Bernard Shaw about St. Joan of Arc.

In this play, when Joan is before the king on trial, one of the officers asks, "How do you mean, voices?"

Joan replies, "I hear voices telling me what to do. They come from God."

The weakling King Charles, whom she has helped to have crowned, impatiently exclaims, "Oh, your voices! Your voices! Why don't the voices come to me? I am king, not you!"

Joan answers, "They do come to you, but you do not hear them. You have not sat in the field in the evening listening for them. When the angelus rings, you cross yourself and have done with it; but if you prayed from your heart, and listened to the trilling of the bells in the air after they stop ringing, you would hear the voices as well as I do."

I think that anecdote is appropriate today because the lessons are about listening, listening deeply within our spirit, within our heart and perhaps, being surprised by what we hear when we deeply listen.

Most of the time, I think we would all agree that we're distracted by noise all around us. We live in almost a culture of noise. It's constant. We seldom go apart to be quiet and to listen. The first thing that I suggest will happen as we begin to listen is that we discover who we really should listen to.

In the first lesson today, we're taught, I think, quite clearly by what happened that if we are listening, every one of us would hear God speaking deep within us.

In that situation where Samuel heard the voice, he immediately thinks it must come from Eli, who is the priest, the representative of the religious establishment. He expected that it must be Eli calling, "Samuel, Samuel!" And to his credit, Eli does not try to take on that role of pretending to speak for God. He tells Samuel, "Go and listen again. It wasn't I who was calling you."

As we hear in the lesson, three times it happened, and then Eli recognizes that Samuel is hearing God speak, so he tells him what to do: "Simply say, 'Speak, God. Your servant is listening.' " That's what we need to do, to recognize that each of us is important enough -- we might not believe this, but we're really important enough -- that God would speak to me within my heart and call me.

We don't have to wait for someone in the church hierarchy to speak for us to understand that God is speaking. God speaks to each of us.

I think in our church today, if we would understand that better, wouldn't we quickly realize that God must be speaking to the church about issues that are so important and are being neglected? The majority of people in this church of ours would agree that there are many ways in which we could resolve the shortage of priests. God is speaking to the church and telling us this. Sometimes the church leaders in this instance certainly are not listening to God speaking through the people.

But this first lesson really tells us that God speaks to individuals and to all of us together as a community of God's people. It isn't always from the hierarchy that God speaks; it's from within the community and there are many, many ways in which that is happening right now in our church, and it would be important for us, as a church, truly to listen to what God is speaking to us.

Then a second point. As we listen deeply to God, we'll discover that it will require change within us. That's what happens when Simon comes to Jesus and Jesus speaks to Simon.

In the Jewish culture, a name really meant the person. So if you change a person's name, you're changing that person's role, who that person really is and what that person's values will be. When Jesus tells Simon, "You are to be Peter, the rock," he's telling Simon, "You are going to be changed if you listen and continue to follow me."

That will happen to us too if we really listen to God speaking to us, God will ask us to change, to take on more fully the values of Jesus, to become must more like Jesus.

There are many, many ways, I'm sure, that each one of us could look within ourselves and say, "I am not deeply faithful to the ways of Jesus," and that we need to continue to grow and change according to the way of Jesus. But probably, one of the most important ways, and one that especially is important for us to reflect on today, because this week, tomorrow, we celebrate the holiday of Martin Luther King Jr. and then part of what resulted because of the extraordinary, peaceful revolution that Martin Luther King led in this country, on Tuesday, we will have an African-American president. Extraordinary change.

That happened because Martin Luther King followed the way of Jesus, refused to use violence, and yet brought about a profound revolution in our nation. What was happening, I think, is reflected in an earlier part of that first letter of Paul to the church at Corinth, where Paul cries out, "Christ did not send me to baptize, but to proclaim his gospel, and not just with beautiful words; that would be like getting rid of the cross of Christ. The language of the cross remains nonsense for those who are lost, but for us who are saved, it is the power of God."

Then Paul goes on to say, "Christ sent me to proclaim this good news, which is Christ crucified."

That's what Paul says. "I have to proclaim a crucified Christ," and to most people, that's nonsense because a crucified Christ means one who has given up power, one who has refused to use violence, one who is ready to forgive and love even his enemies. That's why he's hanging on the cross. He has refused to return violence for violence, evil for evil, hate for hate; he returns love. That's the way of Jesus.

Paul says, "To the Jews it's a scandal," and they can't get over this stumbling block, and "to the Greeks it's foolishness." But to those who follow Jesus, the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength."

It's hard for us truly to accept that, but that's the way of Jesus, to return good for evil, love for hate, nonviolence for violence. That's the way Martin Luther King led this country toward a revolution that is now resulting in an extraordinary event this week.

That's the way that each of us is called to lead our lives, to reject violence, to reject hatred, reject evil; to live according to the way of Jesus, which is the way of love, to be willing to suffer rather than inflict suffering, to be killed rather than to kill. This is extraordinary. It requires profound change in every one of us. It affects our everyday life. It affects our life within our community. It will affect our life as a nation if we follow the way of Jesus.

So as we listen today to this word of God, deeply listen, knowing that God speaks within the heart of each one of us and God is calling us by a name. The name is Jesus. As Paul tells us in that letter to Corinth, "Every one of us is a living member of the body of Christ."

So we are called to live according to his way, and today, as we celebrate this Eucharist and we make present on our altar the suffering, the death and the resurrection of Jesus, I hope that we will be listening deeply to Jesus who comes within our midst and that we will allow Jesus to change us so that we leave this church today, ready to truly be the living body of Christ, bringing his peace into our world because we live according to his way of love.

[This week's homily was delivered at St. Patrick Parish, Detroit, Mich.]

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