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Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

As we reflect on these scripture lessons today, there are two very amazing truths that are being proclaimed, and I hope as we quietly enter into this word of God, we do experience amazement. One of them is very consoling and the other, very challenging. The consoling truth comes in the first reading, where at the end of the passage, the author of this story about Jonah says "When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, God repented and had compassion and did not carry out the destruction God had threatened upon them."

This is amazing. Don't you remember learning, as I know I did, as a child, that God is perfect, God is complete? You can't add or subtract anything from God. We hear those terms, God is "all-knowing," God is "omnipotent," "all-powerful," God is "infinite," "without limit." God is "the one who is." All of those philosophical descriptions of God are deeply embedded in our awareness and we tend to think of God as impersonal; "Source," some people say, or the "unmoved mover." None of these things really, though, show us as deeply as this short verse from the Jonah does, who God really is.

Today's Readings

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Psalm 25:4-5, 6-7, 8-9

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

Mark 1:14-20

Full text of the readings

The author is saying God repented, God changed, but how could that be? Well, we have to remember that God is a personal God. In fact, in our Christian understanding of God, God is a community of persons, where God is relational, three persons, one nature, interacting, exchanging love back and forth. So as a personal God, God interacts with us as persons. In our own relationships, if we are in a relationship with

another person and we interact with that person, we change because of how the person is.

Or the person changes because of how we are. This is what this passage is revealing to us about God. As we interact with God, God changes. The prophet Isaiah put it very beautifully, "God is always waiting to be gracious to us." God is waiting to reach out to us in love once we turn towards God, so this, of course, is an amazing truth, but a very consoling truth. We interact with a God who is personal, who is different to us as we are different at different times in our lives, and we can trust in this marvelous truth. God is always waiting to be gracious to us, to repent, if you will, from what Jonah says.

But now the other amazing truth to reflect upon today is the message that Jesus proclaims at the beginning of his public life in the gospel of Mark. "The time has come, the reign of God is at hand. Change your ways, change your life, believe the good news." Now the amazing thing is the kind of change that Jesus is asking for, and it's a challenging thing. The word that's used in the gospel, perhaps you've heard it sometimes, the Greek word "metanoeo." It means a total turning around of our thinking, of our way of acting, a dramatic, total kind of change.

That's what Jesus is asking of us, because he's saying this reign of God, the time when every person will have a full human life, where we will experience the peace that only God can give, experience the fullness of life and of joy?this is the reign of God and it's ready to happen, but you and I must dramatically change our lives, our attitudes, our thoughts, our values, our way of acting. And that dramatic change is made more clear in the gospel of Matthew, where we turn to what we call the Sermon on the Mount.

I think it's very timely for us to reflect on it this week because you could think of it as the way Matthew puts together these teachings of Jesus in this one long discourse, starting with the fifth chapter of Matthew's gospel. You could think of it as the inaugural address of Jesus, when he was proclaiming that the reign of God is at hand. Matthew has Jesus expand on this, describing in great detail, how we must change our lives. As I said, I think it's very timely that this happens this week because we listened to the inaugural address of President Obama.

He said some quite amazing things, if we were listening. He said, "Guided by these principles once more, we can meet those new threats that demand even greater effort?even greater cooperation and understanding between nations. We will begin to responsibly leave Iraq to its people, and forge a hard-earned peace in Afghanistan. With old friends and former foes, we will work tirelessly to lessen the nuclear threat, and roll back the specter of a warming planet."

"To the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect. To those leaders around the globe who seek to sow conflict, or blame their society's ills on the West: Know that your people will judge you on what you can build, not what you destroy. To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history; but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist."

These are extraordinary words for the leader of our nation to proclaim, and they fit very well with what Jesus has said about changing our lives. But then, I almost hesitate to say this, our President falls short because he also says, "?for those who seek to advance their aims by inducing terror and slaughtering innocents, we say to you now that our spirit is stronger and cannot be broken; you cannot outlast us, and we will defeat you." Of course, he's talking about military defeat, a victory over enemies, and that falls short of what Jesus asks.

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We know that Sermon on the Mount so well, and it really does demand more than our President has asked of us. "You have heard that it was said of old, 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,' but I say to you, do not even be angry with your enemy. If someone slaps you on the one cheek, turn the other. If someone wants you to go one mile, go two. If someone wants your coat, give them your cloak also." What Jesus is saying so clearly is that we must act in such a way that our love surpasses any demand made upon us, any unjust demand made upon us. We will love so much that no one can do something to harm us because we will give away, out of love, whatever is sought from us.

"You have heard that it was said of old, 'love your neighbor, hate your enemy,' but I say this to you, love your enemies, do good to those who hurt you, pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons and daughters of God in heaven.' What Jesus is telling us is that we have to dramatically change our lives. Isn't it marvelous that on the day before President Obama was inaugurated and gave that magnificent speech, we celebrated the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who showed us how you live according to this way of Jesus, who brought about a revolution within our nation, not through force, not through violence, but as he put it, "by changing our hearts, we will so love you, even if you kill our little children, bombing our churches on a Sunday morning.

"We will still love you. No matter what you do to us, we will still love you, and by doing this, we will so change your hearts that you will grant us our rights. You will give us the respect and love that is ours as fellow human beings." Dr. King really lived that. He was willing to accept suffering rather than inflict suffering, be killed rather than kill. That is the way of Jesus? a very demanding way, very challenging. That's what Jesus means when he says "change your lives." We must go deep, deep into our spirits, examine the values that we carry and change them until they're the values of Jesus.

Yes, today we hear this word of God that is very amazing, very consoling, when we realize that our God is a personal God who changes as we change, and very challenging as we understand the kinds of change that God asks of us. But the reign of God is at hand. If you and I can begin to be converted, to change and live according to the good news, immediately our own lives will be changed. We will come to know that peace, that joy, that is the reign of God, and we will be among those who are disciples of Jesus who have heard this call and have begun to live it, so that we will be with Jesus, making the reign of God happen in our world, in its fullness.

That is our challenge, and that is what will bring us the deepest consolation and the greatest sense of peace and joy for us individually and eventually, for all our brothers and sisters throughout this whole planet, peace on earth, goodwill toward all.

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