

Second Sunday of Easter

Thomas Gumbleton | Apr. 19, 2007 The Peace Pulpit

First of all I share with you very much the loss of your pastor Fr. John. And I look forward, as do you, to his return as quickly as possible. I might mention to you that John and I have known each other and have been friends for over 70 years. We both went to elementary school at Epiphany parish not very far from here. And were both ordained priests and have been friends all of these years. And so I know how much you miss him and really want him to come back, and so we do pray with great fervor that that will happen soon.

But you know his being away from this community is perhaps part of an important lesson that we have to learn and that is spoken to us today in the scriptures. Somehow over the years in the church -- and when I say years I mean the hundreds of years in the church's life -- we came to an understanding that a priest is another Christ. Priests are other Christs. It's a very beautiful idea, and I know when I went through the seminary and I'm sure John, who went through the seminary shortly after I did, looked forward to the day when we would be ordained and then have that extraordinary dignity of being another Christ. But if we listen carefully to the scriptures, we discover that it wasn't priests who were other Christs -- at least not alone -- the whole community, every disciple of Jesus is called to be another Christ. The whole community of disciples of Jesus is Christ Jesus present in our world continuing all the things that Jesus did while he was on Earth.

There is a very marvelous passage in the letter of St. Paul to the Galatians, the Christians Paul had converted in that part of Asia Minor called Galatia. He tells them when he was writing to them later: "Now in Christ Jesus, all of you, all of you, are sons and daughters of God through faith. All of you who were given to Christ through baptism have put on Christ. Everyone of you has put on Christ. Here there is no longer Jew or Greek, no distinction between slave and freed, between man and woman. But all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

That's a beautiful and marvelous truth about all of us. And if we listen carefully to the scriptures today, all three of the lessons, we're reminded that it isn't just an ordained person who is what we call another Christ, it's the whole community.

In the first lesson today from the Acts of the Apostles, we're reminded that those first disciples began to gather together in the portico of the temple. They continued to practice their Jewish faith, although they were trying to reform and change it as Jesus had guided them. But St. Luke tells us the believers of one accord used to meet there in Solomon's Porch, and an increasing number of men and women believed in the Lord. And then to show that the work of Jesus goes on, he tells us, "People carried the sick into the seats. Laid them on cots and mats so that when Peter passed by at least his shadow might fall on some of them." But then Luke goes on to say, "The people gathered from the towns around Jerusalem from everywhere around, bringing their sick and those who were troubled by unclean spirits and all of them were healed because they came into the presence of Jesus in that community of disciples who continued to gather after Jesus had left them in his bodily presence."

And that passage from the book of Revelations, where this disciple -- we don't know really who he was there is no indication anywhere else in scripture of who this disciple is -- but his name he says is John, and he was another Christ. And he tells us that because of the word of God and witnessing to Jesus, which is what a disciple is supposed to do, because of that, he was in exile on the island of Patmos. But then even there he experienced the presence of Jesus, as we heard in the lesson. Jesus reassured him, "I am the first and the last, the living one, I was dead now I am alive forever and ever. Now write what you have seen both what is and what is to come." And so this disciple was given the task to carry the work of Jesus.

And the Gospel lesson, it's very beautiful in that lesson especially. All the disciples, all of those who had been at the last supper with Jesus, the whole small community, had re-gathered in that upper room Easter Sunday night. They were afraid. And then Jesus is in their midst. Remember the first thing he says to them is, "Peace be with you." He comes back to them to bring them forgiveness and reconciliation.

And then he gives them a challenge: to carry on that reconciliation to others. He says, "Whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven them, whose sins you restrain they are restrained." And it's the whole community that Jesus is talking about. As we listen to these lessons today, I hope we might really begin to understand that Jesus calls us to be his disciples. That means that each of us is called to go down into those waters of baptism and be buried with Christ, to rise to life with Christ Jesus, to be another Christ. And to carry on the work of Jesus in our world.

We don't become disciples of Jesus so that we can guarantee we're going to go Heaven. We become disciples of Jesus to carry on his work. To do what those first disciples did, reach out to the sick, reach out to those who are suffering, share your bread with the hungry, shelter the homeless poor. All of those things that Jesus did in reaching out in ministry through his disciples. If we are those disciples of Jesus, if we are those other Christs, it's our work now. That's why we become a community of St. Hilary. Why we continue we want to be this community, so that here in this part of the metropolitan area of Detroit we can carry on that work of Jesus. We must really recommit ourselves to continue to make that happen.

And I might say that probably the most important part of our work as other Christs is what Jesus himself did at the very beginning, with those first disciples on Easter Sunday night. "Peace be with you" and then he reconciled them to himself. Remember they had all run away. They had betrayed him. They had denied him. But he came back to reconcile and forgive. And then "whose sins you forgive they are forgiven."

In other words all of us have become reconcilers. And surely there is no work of Jesus that's more important in our world right now than this work of reconciliation. We live in a world where there's so much violence. Religious groups even doing violence against other religious groups. Nations doing violence against nations. In our cities people doing violence against one another. Throughout our whole nation in fact. We need this gift of reconciliation.

A few years ago Pope John Paul II when he was reflecting on the terrible act of violence that was done against this nation in 2001 said, "A world in which the power of evil seems once more to have taken the upper hand can only be transformed into a world in which the noblest aspirations of the human heart will prevail, a world in which peace will prevail, if we bring about reconciliation." How do we restore the moral and social order subjected to such horrific violence? John Paul's words were "my reasoned conviction confirmed and turned by biblical revelation is that the shattered order cannot be fully restored except by a response that combines justice with forgiveness. The pillars of true peace are justice and that special form of love we call forgiveness." Reconciliation. Forgiveness. This is what we need in our world today.

Yesterday, Sen. John McCain, a candidate for president in this country, had a long press conference in his office, and he said about the war that's going on now, "There is no Plan B. I don't have a Plan B." In other words, he's saying the only thing we can do is war, war, war, keep it up, keep it up, until somehow we can say we have won a victory. Even though by that time not just tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of innocent people in Iraq will be killed and more thousands of our own young people will be killed or mutilated.

He says there is no Plan B. But there is -- not a Plan B, it should be a Plan A. The way of Jesus. The shattered moral order can only be restored by building peace on those two pillars, the pillar of justice, the pillar of love, and especially that form of love we call forgiveness.

When we all become that community of disciples of Jesus that we're called to be, and when we really commit ourselves to this work of forgiveness, of reconciliation -- beginning within our own families, within our own neighborhoods, within our workplaces, where ever we are -- don't just love those who love you, love your enemy. Do good to those who hurt you. Return good for evil. Reconcile. When we begin to do this, all of us, then the shattered moral order can be restored. We can make peace prevail, in our hearts, in our homes, in our nation, and in the world.

So this morning I hope that all of us will realize that every one of us is another Christ. All of us together are the community of the disciples of Jesus, and we have to carry on the work of Jesus, and most of all that work of reconciliation that will bring peace into our world.

Editor's Note: Bishop Gumbleton filled in for Fr. John Nowlan at St. Hilary Parish, Redford, Mich., near Detroit. Fr. Nowlan is recovering from a stroke that occurred in March.

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