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Third Sunday of Easter

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

Now when we listen to the scripture today, we might find ourselves like Peter and the other disciples. They weren't just going for recreational fishing. They had given up. They had not realized the full impact of what they had just been through. Holy Week, Good Friday and then Easter Sunday.

They were going back to their ordinary way of life. But now suddenly they were confronted with Jesus. And in a very profound way they learned what we must learn today: that because of the death and resurrection of Jesus everything is different. It's different in our lives. It's different in how we relate to God. It's different in how we relate to one another.

What we've gone through in Holy Week and Easter should have made a profound difference in our lives. And if we've listened really deeply to what the scriptures say today, we'll very important guidance of the kind of difference that needs to happen in our lives.

The first thing that comes to my mind is for us to reflect on that passage from the Book of Revelations. This is a book that we often find very difficult to understand, because we're just not used to apocalyptic literature. But this particular passage I think is so clear. It's telling about the lamb that was slain. The one who had just died. But how had he died? He had died loving his enemies. He had died rejecting hatred and retaliation and vengeance. He had died like that servant that we heard about on Good Friday, in the 53rd chapter of the book of Isaiah.

The servant who was described as being despised and rejected. A man of sorrows. A man from whom people hide their face. Spurned and considered of no account. Forsaken because of our sins, he was crushed for our wickedness. Like sheep we had all gone astray, each following their own way. He was harshly treated, but unresisting and silent. He humbly submitted like a lamb led to the slaughter or sheep before the shearer. He did not open his mouth.

He did not, in other words, respond with hatred or vengeance. He did not want violence to be done to those who were even executing him. Instead he loved them. This is a tremendous example of how Jesus expects us to live. That model of Jesus as the one who not only said to love your enemies but actually did it.

I can't help but -- when I hear that passage from the book of Revelations and then connect it with the rejection of violence by Jesus for any reason what so ever -- I cannot help but remember, and I know we have heard these words before, but it's always important to bring them back. The words that Dr. Martin Luther King proclaimed in that magnificent sermon that he preached in Birmingham, Alabama, during the height of the civil rights revolution, that nonviolent revolution. When the people were beaten up, the police dogs were unleashed on them, they were beaten up with clubs, even some youngster had been killed when a church was burned down.

But Dr. King in that magnificent sermon reminds us of how we have to be like Jesus. And so he proclaimed these words, "We must say to our white brothers and sisters all over the South who try to keep us down, we will match your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force, spirit force. We will not hate you, and yet we cannot in all good conscience obey your evil laws. Do to us what you will. Threaten our children. We will still love you. Say that we're too low, that we're too degraded, yet we still love you. Bomb our homes and go by our churches early in the morning, bomb them if you please. And we will still love you. We will wear you down by our capacity to love, and in the midst of suffering, in winning the victory, we will not only win our freedom, we will so appeal to your hearts and your conscience that we will win you in the process."

Dr King is proclaiming what it means to be like the lamb that was slain. The lamb who is acclaimed by all of the heavens and the earth and all the creatures for all time as we hear so beautifully from the passage from the book of Revelations. And this is what Jesus meant when he said to Peter in today's Gospel, "Follow me."

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You know he had just said to Peter those ominous words, "There's going to come a time when you will be lead by others. You will be going where you would not want to go." And John says in the gospel, "He is telling about his death, his martyrdom." And he says, "Follow me."

Those are the same words that Jesus is saying to us today. Follow me. Follow me. And so that means follow Jesus into the way of nonviolence, the way of love. That might be enough for one homily. And yet there's more in today's scriptures. And we have to listen to the rest, at least briefly. There's a very beautiful call to a special kind of leadership. That whole thing about Jesus saying to Peter "Do you love me?" "Do you love me?" "Do you love me?" And Peter becoming exasperated: "You know I love you. You know everything." He's almost saying, Why do you keep asking me? You know it.

Jesus was trying to impress upon Peter that love is the way, and the only way. And so you have to love with your whole heart, your mind and your soul. God first of all, but every one. But then in a special way, he is saying to Peter, this is the way you do leadership in my community. It's not through power. It's not through coercion. It's not through punishment, pushing people away.

No, it's through love. Feed my lambs, feed my sheep, nurture them, love them. And when I reflect on this passage and listen to it, and try to listen to it deeply, I realize that we have a lot of work to do in our church. To bring about that kind of leadership. Anyone who exercises leadership -- parish priests, religious, parish councils, anyone, parents in the home, teachers in a school -- where ever you're in a position of authority or leadership, it's got to be out of love, a leadership of service, a leadership of love.

I've had a couple recent experiences where I've discovered that that kind of leadership seems to be, well, somewhat lacking in our church. I've had a couple of experiences where I was with a group Catholics, very committed Catholics, including three bishops, priests, religious, mostly lay people. They were in an assembly sponsored by an organization called New Ways Ministry. And the archbishop of the diocese where they were meeting forbade them to celebrate Mass publicly. He thought it might bring some confusion to people. If he has problems with the group, why doesn't he come and be among them, listen to them, lead them with love, rather than simply executing a decree forbidding them to have Mass.

Or there is another Catholic organization, Call to Action, where twice now I have been refused permission to speak to the group. Again because the local bishop feels that it would cause confusion to people. But again I ask, why not come and meet them? Would Jesus simply walk away from people, or would he go among them, talk to them, listen to them, speak to them, show love for them. And if they're in error of some sort, draw them back. If they're, however, proclaiming a message that the leaders need to hear, then listen. Leadership is service. It's love. And so in our church, we need to work for that kind of leadership. And any of us who exercises leadership in any way -- again, within our families, in our work, in our government, anywhere -- we must try to exercise the leadership of love. That's what Jesus said to Peter.

Finally, and this is something that's hard for us many times to understand, but one scripture commentator I've read in regards to these lessons today said that the scriptures teach us proper obedience but also proper disobedience. In that first lesson today, Peter, John and the other disciples had been told, "You may not proclaim anything about this Jesus. We've told you that you have to be silent. Don't go among the people, don't be preaching." And then because they had disobeyed once, they're scourged. That wasn't mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles, the part we read today, but it's right there. It was just left out for some reason in today's liturgy, but it's there. They were scourged, whipped, and they rejoiced because they had been found worthy to be punished for proclaiming the good news about Jesus. And so they left and went right back to their preaching. They said to these authorities, religious authorities and in that case they were acting for the secular authorities also, "We must obey God not any human authority. We must

obey God." So there are times in our lives when perhaps we have to be disobedient.

And at the risk of going on a bit too long, I suggest that we're in the midst of a situation where maybe we have to do a lot more thinking about how we just kind of go along with something that is so obviously evil and wrong, and we participate in ways if we don't object to it, struggle against it. I'm talking about the war, of course, in Iraq.

Last week we experienced in this country, one more horrendous act of violence. Over 30 young people murdered, three teachers slaughtered, massacred. Well that same day or just the day before, almost 200 people were massacred in Baghdad. Now a lot of people will say, Well what's the connection? How can you make such a connection? Well, the connection is that these are human beings, men, women, children, innocents, who are being killed because we have an occupying army in Iraq. We got ourselves engaged in a war that has no justification, even if you accept a so-called just war theology. But certainly not in light of the rejection of violence on the part of Jesus, for any reason whatsoever. If we follow that nonviolent Jesus, how can we be engaged in war?

It may take time for us to come to this kind of a conclusion, but we must really listen deeply to today's scriptures and find that Jesus really is saying, "Follow me, my way." And then it will include disobedience or at least public protest, engaging in marches, or demonstrations or writing letters, or doing something to oppose this violence, unjustified violence. No violence can be justified, but certainly sometimes people try to justify violence, but this cannot be. So we have to be disobedient or at least resistant, and maybe disobedient. It's your tax money, my tax money, that pays for this war. Maybe we have to say at some point, I can't do it any longer, I will withhold my taxes. That would be civil disobedience, and it's not an easy thing to do. And maybe it isn't the thing to do right now, but it's the type of thing we have to begin to think about if we hear today's scriptures deeply.

The nonviolent Jesus is held up before us and that vision of John, all of creation is praising and loving and rejoicing in the lamb who was slain. That's our model. Jesus says to Peter, and Jesus is this lamb that was slain. Follow me. Jesus says that to each one of us as we listen to today's Scriptures. Follow me.

[Editor's Note: Bishop Gumbleton delivered this homily at St. Anne Parish in Frankfort, Mich.]

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