

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Thomas Gumbleton | May. 10, 2007 The Peace Pulpit

The scriptures lessons today are very appropriate for what we are celebrating, the Sacrament of Confirmation. Before we proceed with the ceremony, it's important that we take a few moments to reflect on what really happens in this sacrament, what these scripture lessons are saying to us about it today.

First of all let me just give a brief explanation of why is it so important when I ask do you want to be confirmed, that you respond with a loud, clear, confident voice and say, "Yes, I want to be confirmed." Why is that important? I think, first of all, because it's so easy when you have practiced something, like you practiced before today what you're going to say and what's going to happen and so on. And so when I ask you that question it can be just kind of a routine response: "Yes, I want to be confirmed." You're used to saying it and you don't think about what you're saying yes to.

And that's what's important. What are you saying yes to when you say I want to be confirmed? Is it to the ceremony that will take place and be over in the next hour or so? Is that what you say yes to? No, of course not. It's not just to a ceremony. When you say "I want to be confirmed," you're saying yes to Jesus. You're saying yes to everything that Jesus taught. You're saying, "I want to live according to his values. I want to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. I want to follow him. I want to share in fulfilling the very mission of Jesus, why he came into this world."

Now that's a very serious step to take in your life. And no one should just casually say, "Oh, yes, I'll follow Jesus, I'll be confirmed." No, you really have to be aware of what you're saying yes to. That you are saying, "Yes, for the rest of my life I will try to live according to his values. Try to do his work in this world, fulfill the mission that he came to carry out."

That's why if we listen to the scripture lessons today we really get some clear guidance on what is happening this afternoon, what you are committing yourselves to.

The first lesson, John, the seer or prophet, exiled on the island of Patmos, shares with us his vision, and it's a marvelous vision isn't it. "I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and no longer was there a sea. I saw the new Jerusalem, the holy city, coming down from God out of heaven" and so on. And he describes this marvelous vision, everything. Well as he says toward the end, "God will make everything new. See I make all things new."

That's why Jesus came. We don't think about that often enough. Jesus came into this world to transform it, to

change it into the reign of God. That's what John is talking about in that first lesson, the reign of God, the fullness of God's light, when the new heaven and the new earth are here.

You know if you go into Luke's Gospel, you will find that Jesus -- in I guess what you might call more practical terms -- shows what the reign of God will be like. Because in his very first sermon as recorded in Luke's gospel, the first time Jesus proclaimed the word of God in that synagogue in Nazareth, he said, "The spirit of God is upon me. God sends me to proclaim good news to the poor, to give the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to heal the broken hearted, to proclaim God's year of favor, a time of jubilee, a time when all debts are forgiven, when everyone is reconciled, when everyone has a chance for a full human life." That's the reign of God.

And that time when Jesus spoke about it, Jesus himself not the prophet John, but Jesus, after he had proclaimed those words, he told the people, "This day this scripture passage is fulfilled, even as you listen." He was telling them, this is what I'm here to do, to make all that happen. That's the reign of God.

Now this afternoon when you say yes to confirmation, you are saying, I want to enter into this work of Jesus, to make the reign of God happen. Help to make a new heaven and new earth, to make a world where the downtrodden are set free, no one is treated with injustice, a world where the broken hearted are healed, where there is mercy, where there is forgiveness.

That's what we're here to do. And you are taking the step this afternoon, saying I intend to give my life as a follower of Jesus. Making the reign of God happen, transforming our world.

Now think about for a moment, are we very close to having the reign of God fulfilled? What kind of world do we live in? Well, it's a world where we could point out all kinds of situations that are contrary to what Jesus wants. Just think of the extraordinary imbalance of the world's goods: one-fifth the world's people have 87 percent of the world's wealth. The poorest fifth of the world's people have 1.7 tenths percent. Forty thousand children in that group die everyday from hunger and hunger related causes. The downtrodden have not been set free. The blind haven't been given new sight. The broken hearted haven't been healed. The reign of God, we have a long way to go.

But what's even more prominent in our world I think and what the scriptures speak to today especially is the terrible situation of violence in our world. Violence. We're very much aware of what happened a couple of weeks ago, at that university, Virginia Tech. Horrific violence, in that early morning. Ordinary class day, kids going back to school. Thirty-two kids and 3 teachers murdered.

But recently, just last week, I read an article where the writer pointed out that since the murders of Robert Kennedy and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King in 1968 over a million people in the United States, over a million, have been killed by firearms. That's more than the combined U.S. combat deaths in all the wars in all of our history in the last 40 years. The article goes on to say, "We lose eight children, teenagers, a day to gun violence. As far as young people are concerned we lose the equivalent of the massacre at Virginia Tech every four days." That's the kind of violence that's going on in our world.

And the violence of war, the month of April, this past month, this past April, over 120 of our young people were

killed in that war. The largest number in any single month, now that we're in this fifth year of the war. But then we have to think about the fact that 100 Iraqi civilians are killed every day -- 3,000 a month. That's the kind of violence that war brings about.

Jesus spoke to this very powerfully in today's Gospel. When he gave us a new way. He said very precisely "I give you a new commandment, love one another. Love one another as I have loved you." And Jesus speaks those words in the context of the Last Supper, where he had just got down on his hands and knees and washed the feet of the disciples to show how much he loved them, how much he was ready to serve them. And he was ready to go forth the next day, to his death. Giving his life for those he loved. And dying in a way that showed that his love has no limits, he even loves his enemies.

What he had taught so clearly, do good to those who hurt you, return good for evil, don't just love those who love you, love your enemies. That's what Jesus taught us, the way of love.

And Jesus also pointed out -- he wanted to discover who was really a follower of Jesus --he said this is how people will know you are my disciples, if you love one another, if you carry out this commandment of love everyone will know you are my disciples.

It was just three years ago, this week, that Pope John Paul II was in Spain on the last of his trips as the Holy Father, within the next 10 months he died. But when he was in Spain he spoke to young people, people like yourselves who are being confirmed today. And he pleaded with them. He said, "Beloved young people you well know how concerned I am about peace in the world." He was so concerned about peace in the world, and he condemned what he called "the spiral of violence, terrorism, and war." He condemned all of those things and he begged the young people, "respond to violence and inhuman hatred with the fascinating power of love."

In other words, he begged them to live according to this commandment of Jesus. And that's how we will transform our world. And it's the only way, truly the only way in which we can end the spiral of violence, terrorism, and war. When all of us begin to heed what Jesus said, "Love one another as I have loved you." No limits. No conditions. Love one another.

You may think that's impossible and yet it's really the commandment that Jesus gives to us if we are going truly to be his disciples, his followers. And there are Christians who live it out.

Remember last October, less than a year ago, there was that terrible act of violence in the small town in Pennsylvania, where the Amish community lives. A man went into that schoolhouse there, he sent most of the kids home but kept 10 of them. One of them, a young girl 13 years old, pleaded with him, "Let the others go, kill me if you wish, but let them go." He didn't; he opened fire on all 10, and he killed five of them. How did those people respond? They're Christians, the Amish, very profoundly believing Christian people. Well a few days later when that gunman who had killed himself was being buried in the small church, there were about 100 people, over half of them were from the Amish community. They were there to give comfort to the widow and her three children. Can you believe that? That's loving, even your enemies, those who hurt you do good to them. At Christmastime this past year the people, the Amish people, set up a Christmas tree in the town square and invited everyone to bring gifts and cards for that family. The teenagers in the Amish community went to the

soccer games of the son, Bryce, so that someone would cheering for him. His father was gone.

This is what it means to love according to the way of Jesus. And this is how we are going to change the world. I hope we can really believe this, accept this, commit ourselves to follow the way of Jesus.

In the second lesson today from the Acts of the Apostles, St. Luke describes how Paul and Barnabas went from place to place to place proclaiming the Good News about Jesus. Proclaiming his message of love, spreading that Gospel. Well I hope we might think about ourselves as the same kind of disciples. All of you who are being confirmed today, but the rest of us who are in this church too who are baptized and most of us confirmed, why don't we think about ourselves as St. Paul and St. Barnabas? That we're going back out in our community, we're going to begin to live according to the way of Jesus. It starts in our homes, it starts in our community, it starts at our school or our work place. That's where we have to begin to live according to the way of Jesus, the way of love. And then it will spread. And when enough of us who follow Jesus, truly commit ourselves to live according to his way of love, then that reign of God will begin to break forth in it's fullness, and we will able to experience true peace on our earth. And so I beg you as Pope John Paul did, say no to violence say yes to love and to the way of Jesus.

[Editor's Note: Bishop Gumbleton preached at Guardian Angels Parish in Clawson, Mich., near Detroit, where he also administered Confirmation.]

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