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Fourth Sunday of Lent

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The Peace Pulpit

At the beginning of our second lesson today, St. Paul exhorts us: "You were once darkness, but now you are light in Jesus, and so behave as children of light and the fruits of light. Your fruits will be kindness, justice, peace and truth in every form." At the end of the passage, Paul says, "Awake, you who sleep. Arise from the dead, that the light of Christ may shine on you." Of course, then through you on our world to transform it.

This once more is an example of how God calls us to carry on the work of Jesus -- really to carry on the work of Jesus -- to do what he came to do, to make our world a place where the reign of God happens, where as Paul says, there is "kindness, justice, peace and truth." Now some of us might say, "Well, I'm called to do the very work of Jesus? Who am I?" Many of us think, "How could I be one expected to carry on the very work of Jesus Christ, the son of God?"

If we feel that way, we should recognize how God does choose people to be God's disciples, disciples of Jesus. God doesn't pick the powerful, the most talented, the most dominant people in the world. As we heard in the first lesson today, when Samuel came to anoint the new king and he was to anoint one of the sons of Jesse (and there were eight of them), and he started with the eldest and he thought, "Surely this is the one that God would choose." But it wasn't.

He keeps going down the line because, according to the patriarchal system in which they lived, it was always the firstborn and then going down the line, but finally he comes to the end and says, "God has

indicated none of these is to be the chosen ruler of Israel." So Samuel has to ask Jesse, "Do you have another son somewhere?" and of course, he did; he was out in the fields, he was very young. He was thought of as too young, too underdeveloped, I guess, not grown up enough, so nobody would think of him as being the one that God would choose.

Yet, as it turns out, it was. That sort of follows a pattern that you find in the scriptures, in God choosing people. Again, according to the custom of the people of that time, it was always the firstborn who was the most important, but time and again, God acted differently. The first son of Abraham and Sarah was Ishmael, but he was rejected and Isaac was chosen. When Isaac's twin sons were born, the first one born was Esau, but he wasn't chosen, Jacob was.

Further on, in the 12 tribes of Israel, it was Judah, the youngest of the 12 sons of Jacob, who was chosen to be the leader. As God says in that passage in Samuel, God "does not judge as we judge. Humans see with their eyes. God sees the heart." So God has looked into your heart, and God has discovered one whom God has chosen to be a disciple of Jesus, to carry on his work. We can't use the excuse: "I'm not talented enough, I'm not good enough, I'm not powerful enough," whatever. We can't use that.

God has picked me, just as in the gospel lesson, this man born blind, a beggar. Who would think that he would be -- rather than those self-appointed religious leaders, the Pharisees - who would think this blind beggar would be chosen by Jesus over the very religious leaders of Jesus' people? Yet, that's what happened, isn't it? The leaders, the Pharisees, failed to live up to what God expects; they're false leaders. They put so much emphasis on something like the rule of the Sabbath, you're not supposed to work.

Well, Jesus does the work of mercy, and they criticize him, trying to make that law far more important than the love of God. How absurd it is. But this blind beggar, whom they looked down upon and said, "Who are you? You're just a beggar and you're going to teach us? We're the religious leaders." But it was the blind beggar who got his sight through Jesus, but far more than that, got insight into Jesus and could, at the end of the incident, recognize, "Jesus, you are the son of God." So he's ready to follow Jesus and carry on Jesus' work.

Last Sunday, it was a Samaritan woman -- a despised Samaritan, and a woman --whom Jesus broke the law by talking to, and then made her one of his very first disciples. She goes and tells the people in her village about Jesus and they come back then, because she was sent by Jesus to be a disciple. So we can't think that we're not able or capable of being a disciple of Jesus, becoming the very light that Jesus is, that will bring our world out of darkness into light. We are the ones called now.

But of course, it's a very difficult call.

It's a challenge to be the very light of Christ, to reflect to our world -- in our neighborhood, in our home, in our nation, in the world -- the very goodness, the light of Jesus. Right now, for most of us, it will mean that we have to continue our conversion. This is what Lent is for, why we have these six weeks where we try to undergo once more, a very profound conversion so that we can be like Jesus, become the light that he is to the world in which we live.

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There are current issues in our world where it is particularly challenging to be the light of Jesus. These issues are highlighted now because we're in a political season, so we're trying to set a direction for our nation. How will we, as Christians, as followers of Jesus, be a light, try to follow the way of Jesus in regard to the issues that confront us as a nation?

It really can be hard. This past week I was asked to give a talk at a Catholic church on the Christian response to terrorism. The Christian response to terrorism. We know what our country's response has been and what many leaders of our country continue to insist must be our response, but the Christian response is different. John Paul set it forth very clearly in the year 2002 when he was responding to the challenge facing us of terrorism. He said, "This is a time when evil seems to have the upper hand, the moral order is shattered. How do we transform this period into the peace of Jesus?" and he rejected war as a response.

He said, "I've reflected on this during my whole life and based on my reflection and on the gospels, I must say that the only response that we can bring is a response where we will build peace," he says, "on two pillars -- the pillar of justice and the pillar of that special kind of love we call forgiveness, or enemy love."

But for us to follow that way is really challenging, because it's not the way that most people see. In fact, last week when I was doing this talk, there was a person in the audience who came specifically because he wanted to hear. He's an active military person. His life has been a military career. Afterward, he spoke with me and he was troubled. I can understand, because his whole life has been committed to the idea that you bring peace through war and now maybe for the first time, it was being spelled out for him through the scriptures that Jesus rejects violence, and that we have to follow a way of active love, or non-violence, to be Christian. Maybe for many of us, that's almost a new idea we haven't heard of before.

Yet if you search the scriptures carefully, if you look at the life of Jesus, it's clear-that's the only way he acted, was with love and non-violence. If we're going to be his light in our world, that's one of the things we have to be converted to.

But other issues, like immigration, that's a very big issue, and we'll hear more and more about it. When you consider Jesus as you know Jesus, could you see Jesus building a wall to keep people out of his community, of any community? Is there anywhere in the gospel where Jesus pushes people away?

He's always drawn people in and sometimes it's the most rejected people like this blind beggar, or like the Samaritan woman last Sunday. Jesus is drawing people in that other people reject. Well, if we're going to be his light in the world, that's got to become our attitude. Within the last couple of weeks, there's been a change of regime in Cuba, a nation we've been brought up to think of as a threat to us somehow, so we had an embargo against Cuba for almost 50 years and last week, our government would not offer any friendly overtures to the new president of Cuba.

Do you know who did come? Cardinal Bertone, the Secretary of State for Pope Benedict. While he was there, he entered into immediate dialogue with President Raul Castro and he called for the embargo to be ended because he says, "That's destroying the poor," which it is, in that country and there's no justification for it. That's going to be an issue too. What are our leaders going to say about this? Who would be willing to enter into dialogue? And yet that seems to me what we must do if we want to follow the way of Jesus.

Maybe there's a particular challenge too, that is highlighted because of who the [presidential] candidates are. In our country there's been a long history of racism and also a long history of sexism, so we're really challenged when we begin to think about who can be our leader. Are we willing to give up our deepest racist attitudes that we maybe have never really dealt with, or our putting down of women, both in our culture, who couldn't even vote until 1920, and in our church, where they're told that, in many ways, you're second class?

We have to deal with these issues and try to, in all of them, take on the way of Jesus. Again, this is a very profound conversion that we're being called to undertake. We've had three weeks of Lent so far; we're entering the fourth week. Maybe it's time for us to renew our commitment to deeper prayer every day, to some form of penance of some sort, reparation for our failures of the past. And for a more active reaching out in love to other people so that our conversion will really begin to happen, so that by Easter time, we will be ready to be that light of the world.

As St. Paul says to the people at Ephesus, "Awake, you who sleep. Arise from the dead that the light of Jesus may shine on you," and that through you that light of Jesus may shine on our world and change it so that it will be a world in which justice, peace, kindness and truth prevail.

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