

Third Sunday of Easter

Thomas Gumbleton | Apr. 10, 2008 The Peace Pulpit

I think this is one of the most beautiful of the gospel stories about Jesus after his resurrection. I think it's one that all of us can quite easily relate to. It's so easy to think of those true disciples walking along Easter Sunday night after all they'd been through Holy Thursday at the Last Supper, and then Good Friday, and so sad and disappointed.

Then suddenly, there's Jesus walking with them. Of course, as Luke tells us, they don't know it's Jesus because they haven't really understood about who Jesus is and what he came to do and why. But they're blessed along that journey, because Jesus begins to explain to them. It almost might seem sort of harsh the way Jesus says to them, "How dull you are. How foolish, how slow to believe." And maybe we even share that idea.

Why wouldn't they have recognized Jesus? Why wouldn't they have known all that he came to do and why? But if we judge those two disciples kind of harshly, I guess, maybe we're judging ourselves because how much do we really understand and accept all that Jesus took the time to explain to them? Why Jesus had to suffer and die the way he did, totally helpless on that cross -- tortured, humiliated, despised, looked down upon -- why did all of that have to happen?

Why could it not have been the way they expected it to be? They said, "We had hoped that this Jesus was going to be the one who would restore the power of Israel, the chosen people?" But you see, they had expected that Jesus was to be a new King David -- someone with power, someone who would conquer all the enemies through violence and through war.

So when Jesus came into their midst, a simple, humble, very ordinary human being, the one then tortured and put to death helplessly, and not responding with any kind of power or might, not returning any violence for violence, they didn't understand that or accept it at first.

I'm afraid that's probably where many of us still are. See, we want that old way, the way of thinking of a warrior god who would destroy our enemies, bring forth the reign of God through power and domination, but Jesus wasn't that way; Jesus had to suffer. He was trying to teach a new way, a totally new way, to overcome violence, not through violence, but through love. You love your enemies, you forgive your enemies. Jesus showed them on the cross as he's dying, praying for those he loved, "Father, forgive them."

They thought Jesus was going to expose sinners and condemn them. Instead of that, Jesus welcomed sinners. He drew them close to himself; he had meals with them, much to the chagrin and contempt of the religious leaders. "He eats even with sinners," they used to declare, but that's the kind of Messiah God sent among us -- one who

was going to show us a totally new way of how to make peace happen, bring love into the world.

In the Eucharistic prayer that we use often on Sunday, we say, "Jesus brought us the good news of life to be lived with God in heaven." Through the reign of God, Jesus brought us that good news and he showed us the way to that life, the way of love, and he has gone that way before us, and that is the only way of Jesus.

Do we really accept that?

Recently, President Bush, in a speech responding to the violence perpetrated against us, he named our enemies when he said the perpetrators are being called "Islamofascists." He says against such an enemy there's only one effective response: war. "We never back down, we never give in, and we never accept anything less than complete victory."

Now this current war, probably most of us like most people in the United States now reject, but do we really reject all war, all violence? The new way of Jesus says you love your enemies, you do good to those who hurt you. This past Friday, we remembered the 40th anniversary of the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. During his life, he led a revolution and it was based on the non-violent way of Jesus.

Some of you may remember back then when the struggles were going on at the time when the church in Birmingham, Alabama, was bombed and four little girls were killed. Shortly after, Dr. King preached a powerful sermon in which he showed he had really absorbed the way of Jesus and was trying to make sure all of his followers would follow the way of Jesus, and that we too would.

In the sermon that he gave shortly after that event, he said, "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 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 and we will still love you.

"Say that we're too low, that we're too degraded; yet we will still love you. Bomb our homes, go by our churches early in the morning and bomb them if you please and we will still love you. We will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. But in winning the victory, we will not only win our freedom, we will so appeal to your heart and your conscience, that we will win you in the process."

Isn't that the way of Jesus, that we overcome hatred with love; we overcome darkness with light; we bring peace into our world, not through war and through violence, but through the peace that's in our hearts that we gain from Jesus.

Those first disciples had a very difficult time accepting the way of Jesus. They had thought, as they said, that he was to be the one who would restore Israel through power, through war, and Jesus refused to accept that role. He did it only through love and forgiveness, even enemy love.

We must try to undergo the kind of conversion that Jesus offers to us, the way of love that he shows us. One thing that perhaps we could do is to remind ourselves of what happened there in that tiny inn where those disciples stopped for a meal and how they recognized Jesus, as they told the rest of the disciples when they got back to Jerusalem, "We recognized him in the breaking of the bread."

That's how they named the Eucharist back then. It was the "breaking of the bread." We might say "the bread" because we think of Jesus as present in the bread that's in the tabernacle, but it isn't just the bread. Jesus becomes present in the breaking of the bread because that's how his body was broken. He says, "This is my body, broken for you. This is the cup of my blood poured out for you."

So when we come to celebrate Sunday Eucharist, we have to remind ourselves that it's in this breaking of the bread, the pouring forth of the cup, that Jesus becomes present, and that Jesus enables us to be transformed. If we enter into that breaking of the bread, pouring forth of the cup, then we too will enter into the way that Jesus overcomes hatred with love, violence with non-violence, how Jesus shows us the new way.

This is the good news that brings forth the reign of God, the way of love. Every time we come to the Eucharist, we remind ourselves that the good news happens because of the breaking of the bread and we commit ourselves to try to live our lives the same way, that we will always try to follow the way of Jesus, which is the way of love, and which will really bring the reign of God into our midst.

[Bishop Gumbleton delivered this homily April 6 at St. Hilary Parish in Redford, Mich.]

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