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Fourth Sunday of Easter

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

When we begin to listen to the scriptures deeply this morning, we must try to put ourselves in the situation of those Jewish people who heard that sermon of St. Peter on that feast of Pentecost. It was the feast that the Jewish people [celebrated] 50 days after Passover. Those who had dispersed to other parts of the world would come back to celebrate the feast at their temple in Jerusalem, so they were there from various parts of the world.

Peter was trying to explain to them what had happened when the Holy Spirit descended upon that upper room where the disciples themselves were gathered, and they were filled with that Spirit and went out into the streets and began to proclaim about Jesus, who had died, had been crucified, but had risen from the dead. Those people listened to what Peter said, but it was very difficult because they were people who had heard about Jesus.

They were from Jerusalem, the Holy Land. They had known Jesus. They knew him as the son of Joseph and Mary. They had seen him. They knew he was a wonder worker but that was about as far as it went. Now Peter was saying something new. This is not just Jesus of Nazareth; this is Jesus, the son of God -- not just the son of Mary, but the son of God. Imagine if you were in that situation. You had known Jesus as one like you in every way except sin.

Now suddenly you're being told, and the facts are, he has been raised from the dead, so who is this Jesus? It begins to dawn on you, the son of God come in to the world, Emmanuel, "God with us." Well, you can

understand then, if you really put yourself in that situation of knowing something so tremendously profound and world shaking, so you ask the question, "What have we to do?" Peter tells them, "Repent, change your lives, be baptized."

We think about baptism as the way that our sins are washed away. We learned that when we were children. When you're baptized, if you're baptized as an adult, any sin you have committed is taken away. That's true, but it's much deeper than that. To be baptized means that you are plunged down into the water, you're buried with Christ.

That's what Paul tells us in the letter to the Romans. You're buried -- you die and you're buried. Then you rise up, and it's not just that your sins are taken away; you have begun to live a new life. In a way, you're a new person. Everything starts over. What that means is, as Peter says, "Change your life," make a U-turn. You know how when you are in your car, if you have a Global Positioning System, and you've made a wrong turn and you've got that voice on?

The voice will say, "You are going the wrong way. At the first opportunity, make a U-turn." Well, this is what we're supposed to do in our lives when we're baptized, a 180-degree turn. You turn around, you go a different way. That's what Peter is talking about, "Repent," be a new person, go a different way, change your lives.

Then, as we change our lives, we begin to listen more deeply to the Gospel. Jesus tells us, "I am the good shepherd. My sheep know me. I know them by name. They follow me." In fact, in today's gospel, the image is somewhat different. Jesus says that he is the gate to the sheepfold. Think of that sheepfold. It's an area that's surrounded by barriers.

All of the sheep are inside of it. They're wandering in various directions, closed in, no place to go and just probably bumping into each other. Then the gate is opened and they come out through that gate and they begin to be able to pasture and eat the grass and be fed, nourished. Well, that's the situation we are in -- we're like closed up in that sheepfold. Jesus is the gate. It's opened. We walk out. We follow him.

It's a whole different way of life, a whole different value system, the value system of Jesus, and that's an extraordinary and difficult value system, as we hear in the letter of St. Peter in our second reading today. "This is your calling. Remember Jesus who suffered for you, leaving you an example so that you may follow in his way. He did no wrong. There was no deceit in his mouth. He did not return insult for insult, and when suffering, he did not curse, but put himself in the hands of God."

In fact, "He went to the cross burdened with our sins so that we might die to sin and live an upright life. You were like stray sheep, but you have come back to the shepherd of your souls and your guardian." You are to follow that shepherd, that guardian, as you come out that gate -- a whole new way of life, imitating the example of Jesus. "Follow in his way," as Peter says.

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This past week, we've had testimony before our Senate and before our Congress from the military leader from Iraq and our ambassador to Iraq. Didn't it impress you, they really have nothing new say after five years of war, 4,000 U.S. troops killed, tens of thousands wounded in physical and emotional ways, never to really be made whole again?

Then of course, the suffering on the other side -- the devastation of the country of Iraq, hundreds of thousands killed, over four million homeless, gone into exile into other countries or living in exile in their own country. Four million people -- tens of thousands killed. The whole situation is literally at a dead end. It is a situation of dying and death.

But did you hear anything new, anything new at all? No. Keep on doing what we're doing. No sense of when it might end or what the final outcome will be, except some vague idea that at some point, we will be victorious. Impossible if we keep following the same way, the way we have gone. We're like in that sheep pen, closed up, going in various directions without anything new happening. Jesus is the gate. He will open that gate and we could follow him. That will be a new way, a 180-degree turn.

There was a time when the leader of our country proposed just such a thing, and it's amazing that we have not paid more attention to it. On Sept. 25, 1961, President John Kennedy had only taken office in January of 1961, so it was just a few months after he's been in office. He speaks to the United Nations, the representatives of all the nations of the world, our friends and those we call our enemies.

John Kennedy makes an extraordinary speech. He's very vividly aware of the dangers to our planet and to the lives of every person on the planet. He proclaims to the United Nations: "Today, every inhabitant of this planet must contemplate the day when the planet may no longer be habitable. Every man, woman and child lives under a nuclear sword of Damocles, hanging by the slenderest of threads, capable of being cut at any moment by accident or miscalculation or by madness. The weapons of war must be abolished before they abolish us."

That's a new way, a different way. Give up the way of war, abolish those weapons of war. Because John Kennedy is making that proposal, he tells the representatives of all the nations "it is therefore our intention -- our intention, the people of the United States -- to challenge the Soviet Union, not to an arms race, but to a peace race, to advance together, step by step, stage by stage, until general and complete disarmament has been achieved."

Now there is a new way, a way we have not tried, but it is, or at least it sounds to me, very much like the way of Jesus. You reach out to those you call enemy, you challenge them to wage peace with you, you enter into dialogue with them. You're ready to enter in to diplomacy, to negotiate, to try to understand why they're doing what they're doing -- even to understand why we're doing what we're doing -- to be honest about it, put all our cards on the table, talk to one another, find the ways to wage peace.

Surely that would be a 180-degree turn for us, but as John Kennedy told the nations then and it needs repeating now, "This is the only way." Now for us, we could easily understand that as the way of Jesus. "I am the good shepherd. Follow me and I will give you new life." We will bring into this world new life, a life of peace, fullness of life for every person. It could happen, but we have to follow that new way.

This morning then, as we listen to these scriptures, we must try to put ourselves into the situation of those Jewish people in Jerusalem hearing Peter for the first time. "Repent, be baptized, change your lives," follow Jesus into new life, fullness of life, not just for now, but forever.

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