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Fourth Sunday of Lent

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The Peace Pulpit

In a few moments when I return to the altar, I will proclaim the words of the Eucharist prayer, and I ask you to listen to the beginning words of that prayer right now, because they really express what God is trying to teach us through the lessons of today.

The words are: "Yes, God, you are holy. You are kind to us and to all. For this we thank you. We thank you above all for your son Jesus. You sent him into this world because people had turned away from you and no longer loved one another. Jesus opened our hearts and our eyes to understand that we are brothers and sisters and that you are the one God of us. Jesus brought us the good news of life to be lived with you forever in heaven, and he showed us the way of that life, the way of love."

Later as we reach that point in the Mass, I ask you to listen very carefully to those words when I proclaim them again. But know I hope we can listen deeply for a moment to the words that have just been proclaimed through the scriptures. I think these words of the scriptures today give us a deep insight into that part of the Eucharistic prayer.

Today's Readings

2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23

Psalm 137:1-2, 3, 4-5, 6

Each of the three lessons shows us the extraordinary -- what we almost have to say the unbelievable -- love that God has for us. Often when I am going to preach, the night before I read over the readings very carefully and I try to reflect on them as I fall asleep. Last night something really amazing happened. I don't know how long I had been asleep, but at some point I suddenly woke up and I was saying, "Wow! Wow!" That was my reaction to this message that God is speaking today. I think it should be the reaction of all of us. Amazement.

In that first lesson from the Book of Chronicles, the author, one of the Levites who wrote this passage, listed all the ways that the people had failed to live up to God's covenant. They had fallen into sins. They had been unfaithful. They had been carried off into exile. But then at the initiative of God, we hear at the end of the passage:

In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia,
to fulfill what had been said to the Prophet Jeremiah,
God stirred up the spirit of Cyrus
to issue the following command and
sent it out in writing to be read aloud
everywhere in his kingdom:
"Thus speaks Cyrus, king of Persia:
Yahweh the God of heaven who has given me
All the kingdoms of the earth
has ordered me to build God a house in Jerusalem in Judah
Now all of you who belong to God's people go there,
and may Yahweh your God be with you.

No initiative of their own brought this about, but God's love brought them back. Restored them to the fullness of their life as God's chosen people. But even more in the second lesson if we listen carefully. Paul has been writing this letter to the church at Ephesus, because he is trying to impress upon this community how important it is to draw other people into the community, without limits. In the very beginning of the church before Paul began his preaching, the first followers of Jesus thought that only those who rejected Judaism could be come Christian. Paul said, "No, God is inviting the Jews to be among us, to be one with us. And those who are not Jews do not have to become Jews in order to follow Jesus. God is inviting all." And at this point in the letter Paul says

God, who is rich in mercy,
revealed God's immense love.
Gave us live with Christ
after being dead to our sins.
By the grace of God,
we have been saved through faith.

And then Paul says very explicitly: "This is not your doing. It is God's gift." It is not the result of your works. What we are is God's work. So clearly, God is proclaiming through Paul that God loves us first. God always takes the initiative to reach out.

And then of course in that Gospel lesson, we hear those words that have become very well known

throughout the world because you see people holding up banners sometimes ?John 3:16.? That of course is what we heard this morning, ?God so loved the world that God sent God?s own son.? Not because we earned it but because God loved us.

Jesus is speaking about himself and trying to explain to Nicodemus and now to us how that love of God works in our lives. Jesus brings up a passage from the Book of Numbers that we probably are not so familiar with. There was an incident when the chosen people were traveling through the desert and they were attacked by snakes or scorpions. They were dying. God instructed Moses to make bronze scorpion and set it up on a tree. When the people looked upon that, they were healed. They did not die. Jesus said to Nicodemus:

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As Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert,
so must the Son of Man be lifted up,
so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

What Jesus is telling us is that God has drawn us into God?s life through Jesus, because Jesus was willing to be lifted up. What he means by that is lifted up on the cross. Not to pay a price for our sins. God wasn?t a cruel God who said, ?You must pay back.? No. Jesus said, ?When I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself, because of the love I pour forth upon them.?

You see, the cross, Jesus being lifted up, is not some kind of harsh payment for our sins. It is a demonstration of God?s love. Jesus, even as he is dying on the cross, he is reaching out in love. ?Father forgive them. They know not what they do.? Jesus is reaching out with that kind of love to everyone of us.

?When I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself.? God again takes the initiative to draw us through Jesus to share the very life of God. What could be more amazing than this kind of love? It is always God loving us first and calling upon us to respond.

If we listen deeply to this scripture passages today, I think our first reaction will be and should be amazement. ?Yes, God you are holy. You are kind to us.? That is what we should be crying out in praise. ?God you are holy, you are loving, you are kind to us.? But then also, if we really let ourselves to be drawn into this love of God, we will reach out in love to others.

One of the ways, so easy in a sense and so immediate, is the second collection today. We can reach out in love and solidarity to those people in so many places in Africa especially -- in other parts of the world too, but in Africa right now -- who are desperately poor. One of the countries where Pope Benedict is visiting right now, it is overwhelmed by the lack of health care. An extraordinary number of people are dying because of the lack of it. We need to reach out in love to these people and solidarity. Cardinal Rigali has asked to have this special collection in all churches in the archdiocese. It is especially appropriate, I think while Pope Benedict is traveling in Africa.

But then finally if we respond to this extraordinary initiative of God?s love for us, I think we must try to imitate that love by having that same spirit that Jesus had. Reaching out in forgiveness. Transforming our world not through violence, through hatred, through revenge or retaliation. Even reaching out in love to those who have harmed us or have tried to harm us. Or anyone who has brought evil into our lives, we must forgive.

I think of an extraordinary example of that. One who seemed to be so clearly modeling his life on Jesus was Oscar Romero, archbishop of San Salvador, El Salvador. On March 24, 1980, he was murdered, as many of you may remember. But when he was murdered, it was in an extraordinary way that he manifested this very spirit of God and the love of God shown to us through Jesus. Just before he died, a couple of weeks before he died, he was interviewed by a reporter who was amazed that the archbishop was still in the midst of his people trying to work for justice, trying to bring peace to that country. The reporter said, Why are you still there? Your name is on the death list. Those who are opposed to your work for justice are going to kill you. And the archbishop replied, ?Yes, of course, I have been threatened with death many times. But I don?t believe in death without resurrection. So even if they kill me, I will rise again in the Salvadoran people.? Then he went on to say, ?As a shepherd, I am obliged by divine mandate, the very law of God, to give my life for those I love, that is for those who may be going to kill me.?

The first ones he names as those he loves are those who hate him.

At the end of the interview, he goes on to tell the reporter: ?Look, if in fact they kill me, you may tell them that even now, I forgive and bless those who do it.?

There is someone who has really modeled his life, his spirit, all that he does, on the way of Jesus. Jesus who was lifted up to draw all people to himself through love. Oscar Romero imitated in that very marvelous way. Two weeks later he was shot to death, and he looked upon that killer not with fear or hatred but with love.

We are not going to be asked to spend ourselves in the same way, I don?t think, but in other ways in our daily lives we must try to imitate that love of Jesus manifested to us through the gift of God giving us Jesus who was willing to be lifted up to draw all people to himself. Not through force or violence, but only through love. We must carry that spirit of love into our everyday lives. If we really hear what God speaks to us today, it can change us dramatically, and it will help to change the world in which we live.

So again I urge you, praise God with great joy: Yes God you are holy. You are kind to us. For this we thank you, and we promise to try to follow more faithfully the way of Jesus through the life that you share with us.

(This homily was preached at Mother of Consolation Parish, Philadelphia, Pa.)

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