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Sixth Sunday of Easter

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The Peace Pulpit

As I just mentioned to you, you have to be committed to wanting to be confirmed, so that's why I ask that question: "Do you want to be confirmed?" When I ask you the question, I always look for a very clear and strong answer that you say with confidence, "Yes, I want to be confirmed." Why is that so important? After all, you have prepared for a number of months for this moment and obviously if you didn't want to be confirmed, you probably would have dropped out a long time ago.

Today's Readings
Acts 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48
Psalm 98:1, 2-3, 3-4
1 John 4:7-10
John 15:9-17
Full text of the readings

So you want to be confirmed, but it's important that you say that in a loud, clear voice, because when you say, "I want to be confirmed," what are you saying yes to? Is it to a sacrament, a ceremony that will be over in 45 minutes or so? No, it's not. When you say, "I want to be confirmed," you're saying yes to Jesus. You're saying, "I want to follow Jesus Christ. I want to live according to his values. I want to live according to the way Jesus lived. I want to be one of his disciples," and it's not just for this evening; it's for the rest of your life. You're saying, "Yes, I will follow Jesus Christ, live according to what he taught, the way he lived."

And as we begin to think that through, I hope all of us will realize what a difference that should make in our lives when we say, "Yes, I will follow Jesus. I will live the way he taught." This evening, if we listen carefully to the scriptures, we'll discover, in a very deep way, what it means to live according to the way of Jesus. I must warn you, it's not an easy way. Sometimes when we hear what Jesus really is asking of us, people say no, they don't want to follow what Jesus really was asking.

The first lesson this evening is part of an incident in the Acts of the Apostles that you didn't hear about in

the lesson; you just heard the final part of it when Peter comes to the house of Cornelius, a Roman citizen, one who was not a Jew and was not a follower of Jesus, but was a very religious person. Peter, in fact, when he first gets to the house, he tells Cornelius, "As a Jew, I am not allowed to enter into the house of a non-Jew," and yet, because God had given Peter a special sign, Peter went to Cornelius and went into his house.

Cornelius, who was a very God-fearing person, fell down, as you heard in the lesson, in front of Peter. Peter said, "No, no. Don't kneel in front of me. It's God only that you adore. I'm not God." But then as they go on, as you heard in the lesson, suddenly the Holy Spirit comes upon that house. They all experience the presence of the spirit of Jesus, and Peter then says as you heard in the lesson, "How can we not baptize Cornelius, his household? They've already received the Holy Spirit. God surely has blessed them, so now we will bring them into our community through baptism."

But what is really significant about this is that Cornelius (and this was new in the church at that time) did not first become a Jew. In the early church, before someone became a follower of Jesus, that person became a Jew. All the first disciples, of course, were Jews. They continued to go to the temple, to pray every day. They continued all their Jewish practices. But now God was leading them beyond that, so God was showing Peter and the others that it's only important to follow Jesus. Now Jesus didn't come to destroy Judaism; he himself said, "I came, not to destroy the Law, but to fulfill it, make it more complete than ever."

So from this point on, the church began to spread in many different parts of the world. It spread very rapidly and people became followers of Jesus without becoming Jews first. When you were a Jew in the time of Jesus (and it's still true now), it was very easy to tell who were Jews because of the rituals that they followed, the rite of circumcision, and all the Jewish laws -- 613 very specific laws about what to eat, how far they could walk on the Sabbath day -- a very clear set of life circumstances that identified the person as a Jew.

Now all of these were going to be gone, because you no longer had to become a Jew. Here is what's really important in today's lessons, because we're being taught what it means, more than anything else, to follow Jesus. You hear it in the gospel lesson and in the second lesson today, very clearly. St. John, the beloved disciple, in writing to the first Christian community tells them: "My dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God, and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God, for God is love."

This is what it means to be a follower of Jesus, it's to follow the way of love. John goes on to say, "This is love, not that we loved God, but that God first loved us and sent Jesus. Dear friends, if such has been the love of God, we too must love one another." Even more in the gospel lesson today, this is part of the conversation Jesus had with his disciples at the Last Supper. It was a very intimate moment. Jesus is speaking to them just before he's going to be executed. He's very close to them -- they're his friends -- and what does he tell them?

"As God has loved me, so I have loved you. Remain in my love." He says, "This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you. There is no greater love than this, than to lay down your life for your friends, and you are my friends. I call you friends because I have made known to you everything I learned from my father." What Jesus is showing us is that for him, he wants his disciples to be people who love. As I mentioned before, it's not an easy thing. "No greater love than this, than to lay down your life for your friends," and that's exactly what Jesus did for us.

Jesus says to love, according to his way of love, is to be of service to others, to give your life. To love according to the way of Jesus is to break down barriers. In one of his letters to the church at Galatia, St.

Paul says, "Among the followers of Jesus, there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, rich or poor, we could have black or white. There is no difference. Everyone is a son and daughter of God. All of us are brothers and sisters to one another." We have to break down all of the barriers.

If we're going to be disciples of Jesus, we have to make sure we build bridges to other people. We don't identify people as our enemies; every person is someone we are to love, and that becomes very hard at times, because Jesus really expects us, as he says in the gospel, "Don't just love those who love you. Love your enemy. Do good to those who hurt you. Return good for evil." But we live in a world where people don't pay much attention to that. In fact, we, our own nation, often fail in this regard.

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When we're talking about love, of course it can be in everyday circumstances, and that's where most of us will be challenged by this commandment of love, in our families, in our parish family, in our communities, in our nation, but we also have to think beyond that. If we were really following the way of love, do you think we would be at war right now? I don't think so. That may be radical, some people will say, but Jesus says you don't return evil for evil, hate for hate; you return love for hate. We have to find a way to settle disputes without war. It would be possible if we really determined to follow the way of Jesus.

Right now, there's a lot of information in the news reports about torture and what our nation has done in torturing people, whether it's right or wrong. It's amazing to me, but do you know that of churchgoing people -- this was in a survey taken up within the last couple of weeks -- over 55 percent say it's okay to torture. People who don't go to church, it was only 40-some percent. There's something wrong. We must not be listening to God, especially as God has spoken to us through Jesus. How could you torture if you're trying to follow the way of love?

Not very long before he died, Pope John Paul II visited the country of Spain, and this was at a time when he had been struggling over a number of years to speak out against war, and he had tried to prevent the war in Iraq. We had gone to war anyway. But when he got to Spain, and he knew that he was close to the end of his life, he seemed like he was making one final plea, especially when he spoke to young people.

There was an evening where he had hundreds of thousands of young people in front of him and he said, "Beloved young people, you well know how concerned I am about peace in the world." and then he went on and told them, "Keep yourselves far away from any form of exasperated nationalism, racism and intolerance." "Respond to blind violence and inhuman hatred with the fascinating power of love." And he begged them, as he condemned what he called "the spiral of violence, terrorism and war," and then he begged the young people, "be artisans of peace."

Think about that -- that you should be an artisan of peace. An artisan is someone who has a dream, a vision, dreams about what could be, what might happen and then makes it work, brings it about. That's what an artisan does -- a sculptor, a painter -- they have the vision, the dream, first; then they make it happen. John Paul is saying be an artisan of peace. We could change our world if we followed the way of Jesus, yet so far we haven't. We continue to think that war will solve our problems, that torture will solve our problems, that hatred will solve our problems, that if someone hates us, we should hate them. That's not the way of Jesus.

So this evening, as we celebrate this sacrament of confirmation, I'm especially concerned that you young people, as you're taking this direction in your life, understand what it means to follow Jesus. It means to reject violence, hatred, war. It means to follow the way of love, that fascinating power of love that could

change everything. But it's not just the young people, it's the rest of us here. We haven't been very faithful to the way of Jesus over the centuries, but now it is a time, a moment, when every one of us, as we celebrate this sacrament of confirmation today, can open ourselves to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, let that spirit of Jesus come into our hearts.

We've prayed that it will come in a very powerful way for our young men and women here, but all of us, pray that the spirit of Jesus will come upon us and change us, so that we can go back out into our everyday life and in every day, practice the way of love, that we can influence what happens in our nation, so that we become a people who work only for peace and for love in the world, that we follow the way of Jesus. When enough of us begin to do that, our world will be transformed, but it starts with each one of us, so pray that the Holy Spirit will change your heart, change my heart, each of us, that we will be witnesses to the way of Jesus, to the way of love, for the rest of our lives.

[This homily was given at St. Bernardine of Siena, Westland, Michigan.]

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