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Jesus teaches us how to die, not how to kill

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

Certainly with the reading of the Passion of our Lord as we've just done in this Gospel of St. Luke, there are very, very many things for us to reflect upon. I think that we really ought to do what is proclaimed to us by the prophet in our first lesson, where the prophet says, "God has taught me so I speak as God's disciple. Morning after morning, God wakes me up to hear, to listen like a disciple. God has opened my ears."

During this week now, because obviously all that we hear in the gospel lesson today we cannot reflect upon at this time, but throughout this whole week which we call Holy Week, we must continue to try to listen deeply, to really be like that disciple who was learning from the words and the actions of Jesus, so that we can be changed and become truly an authentic disciple, one who follows Jesus carefully and faithfully.

This morning, I will just suggest, from the long account of the passion and death of Jesus that we've listened to, a couple of things that perhaps we can start to hear more deeply in our hearts in order that we can be changed by what we hear and by what we see Jesus doing. The first thing that I call our attention to is what happened there at the Last Supper. It seems very strange, I think, that Jesus, as we heard in the gospel, has just offered the bread and the wine, saying, "This is my body, given up for you. This is my blood, poured out for you." Jesus is memorializing his death through those words, showing us how much he's willing to give for us – his whole life and his whole being. He lays down his life for us, and then what do the disciples do? A couple of verses later, we hear Luke saying, "They began to argue among themselves, 'Who's to be the greatest? Which of us is really the one who is going to be next to him at his right hand in a position of power?' " It seems so absurd, doesn't it, that here Jesus is pouring out his very life for them and they're arguing about who is to be the greatest.

Full text of the readings

In John's Gospel, as we will hear on Good Friday, Jesus even dramatically shows them who is the greatest. It's not the one who has the highest place, the one who has the most power, the one who has the most prestige; as he says in today's gospel and then shows in John's gospel, it's the one who is willing to serve.

In John's gospel, Jesus does that very thing. Dramatically, he takes off his outer garment, puts a towel around himself, and then goes before each disciple and like a slave, Jesus washes their feet. What an extraordinary example, and yet how many of us have really listened to these words, listened to what Jesus does and watched him in action so that we can follow: not want the highest place, not want a position of power, not wanting to dominate, but always simply choosing to be the servant, the one who reaches out in love to give of ourselves to others?

It's not only each of us individually; our whole community as a church, we continue, it seems, to try to make these distinctions, some people in higher places than others and we separate clergy from laity, religious from lay, instead of remembering that we are all disciples of Jesus, equal in freedom and dignity. No one has a higher place than another -- a whole community of disciples. If only we would interact with one another on that basis all the time, our whole church would be transformed, and we do that within our family life, within our community life and in our church life. What a difference it would be. So this is the first thing that I hope we will listen to deeply, that all of us are brothers and sisters in Jesus, equal in freedom and dignity with every other person. No one has a higher place; we're all a community of disciples trying to listen, trying to learn, trying to follow Jesus faithfully.

The other thing that I suggest to reflect on today and throughout this week is perhaps the most difficult thing that Jesus teaches us. There's a scripture scholar, John McKenzie, who has written in a book called *The New Testament Without Illusion*. In other words, it's the clear, radical New Testament, the gospel of Jesus. John McKenzie says, "If Jesus did not reject violence for any reason whatsoever, we know nothing about Jesus." If he did not reject violence for any reason whatsoever, if we can't hear that in the gospel, we may as well say we can't know anything about Jesus of Nazareth. It's so clear. He rejected violence for any reason. His whole teaching, in his word and in his actions was, we transform the world into the reign of God through the power of love and nothing else -- not through violence, not through war, not through killing, but only through love.

John McKenzie tells us, "Jesus taught us how to die, not how to kill," but have we listened to that? I think not. Look at our church and our world and down through the centuries, we seem to have rejected this teaching of Jesus, yet it's so clear in what we heard today, what we will hear in the other accounts of the passion and death of Jesus, if we listen carefully on Good Friday to John's account, we will hear Jesus rejecting violence. In the garden, when they were arresting him, Peter gets out his sword and he slices off the ear of the high priest's servant. Jesus says, "Put away your sword. Those who live by the sword will die by the sword." He rejects that Peter should try to defend him with violence. He will not allow it.

In fact, instead, what does Jesus do? He reaches out in love; he heals the high priest's servant that very moment. And I could go on through the account about today's procession -- a very minor thing, in a sense, I suppose, but a very powerful symbol: They want to make Jesus a king. He has already said, "No, I am not a king. I reject it." Before when they tried to make him a king, he went into hiding. He did not want earthly power. He did not want the power of a king, the power of armies, so when they insist, on this Palm Sunday, on the Sunday before he is put to death, what does he do? He summons up for them (they would be very aware of this) the prophecy of Zechariah, where Zechariah predicts how the one who will become the savior of Israel rides into Jerusalem, not on a war horse, but on a donkey, the beast of burden of the poor. So Jesus says, "Go! I will not ride on a war horse as a warrior king into Jerusalem. I will ride like a

humble peasant on the back of a donkey." Again, he's rejecting violence, earthly power, war power.

But probably, and most clearly, the way Jesus rejects violence and reaches out in love is on the cross. He's being executed. He's already been tortured, now he's hanging in agony, and he looks down at those who are putting him to death and what does he do? He reaches out in love, "Father, forgive them." He will not retaliate. He will not take vengeance; he forgives.

Again, I suggest this is the most radically difficult teaching of Jesus. During this week, if we listen deeply to the gospel lessons each day and then again especially on Friday to the account of the passion and death of Jesus as recorded by St. John, if we listen deeply we will hear this message over and over again: Reject violence. Reject the ways of armies and warfare, the power of kingdoms. Reject all of that. Only try to follow Jesus and transform our world through the fascinating power of love.

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If we listen deeply and allow the words and actions of Jesus to touch our own spirit, enter deeply into our hearts, we will be transformed and then perhaps we will begin to be the faithful disciples who hear God's word and follow it.

[This homily was preached at St. Hilary Parish, Redford, Mich.]

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