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Breathe the spirit of Jesus into the world

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

Now as we begin our reflection on the readings this morning, I think it's appropriate, first of all, for me to say how much I appreciate this opportunity to celebrate with the very family of St. Donald Parish this Sunday liturgy, the second Sunday of Easter, and especially to celebrate with you as you join with the young people of your parish in celebrating the sacrament of confirmation.

And how appropriate are the lessons that we have heard this morning, especially the gospel lesson. Jesus, at the Last Supper, had promised the disciples, "When I am gone, when I have returned to God, I will send you the Holy Spirit, the paraclete, who will lead you into all truth."

Jesus knew how much they were going to miss him, so he promised that he would continue to be with them through the Holy Spirit, that bond of love that joins the Father and Son in the Blessed Trinity.

Psalm 118:2-4, 13-15, 22-24
In the Acts of the Apostles that St. Luke is the author of, we find this event of the sending of the Holy Spirit happening 50 days after Easter when the Jewish people were celebrating their feast of Pentecost. But in John's gospel, it happens that very first day of the week, the day Jesus broke the bonds of death and came alive. That evening, as John tells us, the community of disciples were gathered together in the same place they had celebrated the Last Supper. Suddenly Jesus is there in their midst. He's alive and they are just overwhelmed and overjoyed, don't know how to react, but Jesus, in a very beautiful way, reaches out to them: "Peace be with you."

"Peace be with you."

I don't know if we can really, truly appreciate how much those words must have meant to those disciples. Remember, they had been unfaithful to Jesus, most of them. Yes, John was at the foot of the cross and Mary, his mother, and other women who were his disciples, but most of them had fled in fear, had

abandoned him. Judas had betrayed him; Peter had denied him.

And now he comes into their midst, not to condemn them in any way, but to forgive them, to assure them of the peace that, as he had told them at the Last Supper, a kind of peace the world can't give; it's a peace that comes from God, a peace that's deep within our spirit.

Those first disciples might have expected Jesus to rebuke them, to be angry with them, to be upset, but instead, he uses this moment to offer them peace, forgiveness. Then he challenges them, "As God has sent me, I send you."

He wants them to do the same thing he has done, so he prepares them for it, as John tells us, he breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Probably we don't catch the illusion as quickly as those first disciples would have because they're Jewish people, they know their scriptures, the Hebrew Scriptures. They would think of the book of Genesis, the second story of creation in that book of Genesis, where God takes clay and forms a human person. Then the author of the book tells us God breathed on that human form, blew breath into the nostrils of the man, of that human, and that clay suddenly becomes alive! Human life is created, sharing the spirit life of God.

What John is suggesting when he uses this description of Jesus imparting the Holy Spirit by breathing on them, that Jesus is bringing about, in all of them, a new creation. We will be different now from the human beings we were before because we're filled with God's spirit in a way we never were before.

"Receive the Holy Spirit," Jesus breathes on them. They become radically new, radically different, alive with the very life of Jesus. That, of course, indicates to us what it means when Jesus says, "As God sent me, I send you."

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Jesus is sending them into the world to transform that world just as he had been sent. They are to now live according to his way, radically different from the way the people in the world around them were living, radically different from the human culture of our own time -- live according to the values, the ways of Jesus so we can transform the world into the reign of God.

And immediately in this gospel lesson, as we listen to it, we become aware -- what is one of the most important values that Jesus wants us to bring into our world? It's the very thing that Jesus does himself when he comes among those disciples and shares with them the peace that only God can give, a peace that comes from forgiveness. The value that Jesus is asking us to share in the world in which we live is this way of forgiveness, the way of peace, the way of love.

It clearly is one of the most important values in the life of Jesus. When he proclaimed that extraordinary discourse that we call the Sermon on the Mount, one of the first things he said was, "You have heard that it was said of old, 'Thou shalt not kill,' but I say to you, do not even be angry with a brother and sister."

No vengeance, no anger, no retaliation, and how important that was to Jesus, he makes clear, because he says, "If you know your brother or sister has something against you or you have something against your brother or sister, go first and be reconciled. Then come and offer your gift." Nothing is more important, not even to come and worship God.

Jesus showed us that just before he died, in a very dramatic way. Remember Holy Thursday night again,

that last supper, Jesus identified his betrayer, Judas, and Judas went out to have Jesus arrested, tortured, put to death, and then Jesus leaves the upper room, goes the garden to pray and afterwards that mob is coming with swords and clubs. Who is leading the way? Judas. What does Jesus do? Walks up to Judas, embraces him, "Friend, why have you come?" Jesus is trying to draw him back, he's forgiving him.

Now at that moment, Judas didn't respond, but Jesus offered the reconciliation, offered the forgiveness. That's what he wants us to do always, is to be people who will change our world by being people who are ready to forgive, people who always reject the idea of vengeance, retaliation, but instead reach out in forgiveness and be the first to forgive, the first to try to make the reconciliation happen.

I think there's probably not a more radical teaching that Jesus challenges us to try to follow his way, because what it means, of course, is what he said, "you have heard that it was said of old, 'Love your neighbor, hate your enemy,' I say to you, love your enemy." You forgive this person who is your enemy, who has done evil against you, because you love that person. No violence, no hatred, no retaliation, reaching out in love.

On every level of our life, this is a very difficult thing to do. Sometimes, I know, probably most of us have seen this, perhaps experienced it, how animosity can build up even within a family, where we always have the hope and the dream that it will be a place where everyone is welcomed and loved because they're part of this family.

Sometimes bitterness, a sort of alienation can happen, and how difficult it is to heal that, but if we're going to follow the way of Jesus, then we must pray that we can have the courage, the strength, the generosity to be the one that reaches out to reconcile and to forgive. It's very hard in our families and our neighborhoods, within our community, and in the world community.

Think about the fact that our nation has been at war since 1991, over 20 years now, when we went to war back in January 1991. That war ended, the militarized part of it, the fighting on the battlefield and so on, ended quite quickly, but then there were 12 and a half years of sanctions against the people of Iraq, bringing about the death of a million and a half people, over half of them children -- see, a constant violence against them.

Then a second war and that war is still going on, and then we go to war in Afghanistan. Sometimes we think the war in Afghanistan especially was justified, but what if we had really heeded what Pope John Paul wrote in a message for the World Day of Peace, for January 1, 2002, a few months after that terrorist attack against our nation on September 11, 2001?

Pope John Paul reflected on that event because it was an event that really, he knew, could shatter the peace of the world. In his reflection that he puts into this Peace Day statement, he says, "We live in a world in which the power of evil seems once again to have taken the upper hand," and we ask ourselves how will in fact this world be transformed into a world in which the noblest aspirations of the human heart will triumph, a world in which true peace will prevail."

Evil, terrorism, violence, killing -- evil seems to have the upper hand. How can we transform it?

John Paul goes on to say, "Recent events, including the terrible killings just mentioned," and he had been talking about what happened on September 11 in our country, "move me to return to a theme which often stirs in the depths of my heart when I remember the events of history which have marked my life, especially my youth." Remember, he grew up under Nazi tyranny and the violence of the war that the Nazis perpetrated against Poland, and then 40 years of communist tyranny. So it was his own life that he's reflecting on, as he says,

"especially my youth."

"The enormous suffering of peoples and individuals, even among my own friends and acquaintances, caused by Nazi and Communist totalitarianism, has never been far from my thoughts and prayers. I have often paused to reflect on the persistent question: How do we restore the moral and social order subjected to such horrific violence?"

"My reasoned conviction, confirmed in turn by biblical revelation, is that the shattered order cannot be fully restored except by a response that combines justice with forgiveness. The pillars of true peace are justice and that [special] form of love, which is forgiveness," enemy love. We must have justice and forgiveness, and he points out almost immediately how, in the present circumstances, we might wonder, How can we speak of justice and forgiveness as the source and condition of peace?"

"We can," he says, "and we must, no matter how difficult this may be; a difficulty," he points out, "which often comes from thinking that justice and forgiveness are irreconcilable," you have to have one or the other. But he reminds us, "forgiveness is the opposite of resentment and revenge," retaliation, vindication -- forgiveness is the opposite of that, not the opposite of justice.

So we work for justice, trying to bring about a right order among our relationships as individuals, and also as communities and as nations -- the right order, where everyone's rights are respected, but we do it without having resentment, hatred, or determination to get even; very difficult, no question about it, but what if we had followed a path where we were seeking to bring justice, but also with forgiveness? Instead of building up a sense of fear that easily leads then, to hatred and to a desire to dominate, overpower, control, what if we had followed a different path?"

Do you think we would still be, now these years later, engulfed in a war that seems to have no end, where the war that we have been engaged in for 21 years is now a war that spreads throughout the Middle East? Might not there have been a different resolution of all these problems if we had had the courage, the strength, the spirit of Jesus, and acted according to that spirit of Jesus, and combined justice with love, with forgiveness?"

True peace is built on those two pillars, the pillar of justice and the pillar of love.

This morning as we celebrate this sacrament of Confirmation, and this is a huge challenge for these young people, but for all of us who have been Confirmed, as we, I hope, renew our own openness to the spirit of Jesus being poured forth upon us and allowing that spirit of Jesus to change us, that we become radically changed, have the new spirit of Jesus breathed into our spirit and we become like him, and we go out of this church today, confirmed, all of us, in that spirit of Jesus and ready to live according to his way, his value, what he taught us in his words and his example, "As God has sent me, I send you."

So we go forth to try to breathe the spirit of Jesus into our world so that we can say to all our brothers and sisters everywhere, "Peace be with you."

[Bishop Gumbleton gave this homily at the confirmation service at St. Donald Parish in Roseville, Mich.]

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