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Love the enemy that confronts you today

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

Once more during this Easter season, on this third Sunday of Easter, we are receiving instruction about the deepest meaning, about the most important mysteries of our faith: the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Of course, the resurrection is the event that we mostly celebrate and rejoice in, and our Easter season is filled with joy, but this morning, we are being pushed a little bit further and being asked by this Scripture passage today, this Gospel lesson, to look back at the death of Jesus.

Why did He die? Why was He executed? What does that tell us about how we are to live with His risen life?

Obviously, it was very difficult for these two disciples especially to come to grips with the death of Jesus. As they said to Him before they recognized who He was, "We had thought that He was the one who was to redeem Israel."

Third Sunday of Easter

These were people who are under occupation. The Romans had invaded their country and taken it over. It was a very cruel occupation. They hated those Romans. They wanted to get rid of them, and they thought that this Jesus, who had become such a popular leader and had such a huge following of people, that He was the one who was to free them from the slavery of occupation and restore them to their kingdom of Israel. 1 Peter 1:17-21

Luke 24:13-35

Full text of the readings

They had a totally wrong idea about Jesus, and this is very hard for us to accept. It's the most radical truth of the Gospel. They thought Jesus was to be like the prophets of old, prophets who would condemn evil and kill those who were perpetrating the evil. They were thinking of someone like Elijah.

There is a passage in the Book of Kings where Elijah carries out a competition with the false prophets. When he proves he is the only true prophet, he denounces the others and he has them murdered. They were thinking that's the kind of savior Jesus was, like that prophet or the prophets who not only denounced the sinners, but who bring about liberation and establish a kingdom.

They were thinking of Jesus like David, the warrior king, who would restore Israel to all its power and might as a great kingdom on earth, and Jesus wasn't that. No, what we learn about Jesus in the Scriptures, and then about his death especially is that Jesus was totally different from everything they had expected. This was a Jesus who reaches out in love to sinners, to those who are hurting, to those who are in pain, a Jesus who is a prophet, but is totally different because he would even reach out to the Romans, the occupiers.

Remember the beautiful story about the little girl who is dying? She's the daughter of a Roman Centurion, but Jesus can't say no to someone who is suffering, even if that someone is thought to be an enemy. So He goes to the home of the Roman soldier and restores that child to life.

Jesus is not one who destroys sinners. He welcomes sinners. What an amazing difference. There are many examples in the Gospels of how Jesus draws sinners to Himself, those who feel they've been rejected by God or are tempted to reject God.

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When He's at a meal one time at the house of one of the Pharisees, a woman from the street comes in and kneels at his feet, and begins to weep. She covers his feet with tears and then wipes them with her hair and the Pharisee objects. "She's a sinner. Don't you know that?" Jesus said, "She is forgiven much because she loves much." He could draw sinners back to Himself, or draw anyone who was hurting to Himself.

He did this time after time. There was the woman at the well who had no husband, because as Jesus tells her, "You've already had five." Most people thought He would condemn that woman, but instead, He blesses her and draws her closer to Him. She becomes the first disciple who announces about Jesus as the Messiah to the town of Samaria where she is from.

Jesus embraces those who are hurting, whether it is in a physical way or a spiritual way. He loves and reaches out in love.

Obviously and clearly, the most dramatic way that Jesus differs from those earlier prophets and a warrior king like David is that He refuses to use violence, war, killing, and he instructs His two disciples on this journey to Emmaus, about how instead of inflicting suffering on others, the Messiah had to be the one who accepted suffering and even reached out in love to those who were putting Him to death.

That reaching out in love transformed those enemies into friends. It's the most profound message of the Gospel, how we have to learn to love even our enemies. It was so clear.

Jesus had said it, "You have heard it said of old, 'Love your neighbor. Hate your enemy.' I say to you, 'Love your enemy.'" It wasn't just words for Jesus. Remember what He did as He was dying, the very ones

who are executing Him, He's reaching out in love. "Forgive them," He begged God. He loves those who are killing Him.

I'm sure this is the most difficult part of the whole message of Jesus, and we find it very hard to bring it down into our everyday life. In our everyday relationships we can hold grudges. We can want vengeance. We can want to retaliate. We struggle against that but often we fail, so we need this example of Jesus who loves us so much and teaches us how to love others.

Obviously we can't ignore what has just happened a week ago today, where our government sent troops in to kill our enemy. I have a friend who teaches in the Catholic high school, and this past Monday, she wrote a reflection on what had happened the night before.

I share part of this with you because it seems to me it's such a powerful expression of what the whole death and resurrection of Jesus is really teaching us.

He starts off by saying,

"Praise God for the students who sought me out today to discuss their concern about the spirit of celebration that reduced the events of last night to a sporting event. Their hearts were troubled by the fact that Christians were dancing in the streets at the death of a man, any man. I thought a lot today about those who died on 9/11 and in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, Israel, New Orleans, Japan and on the streets of our communities.

"I ran out of and wanted only to go somewhere and weep for our blind and battered human family. God have mercy on all of us as we once again turn to vengeance and retaliation in response to the violence of others. Was Osama bin Laden a man of unspeakable violence? Yes. A man of our time? Yes. A child of God and viewed with human dignity despite his horrific acquiescence to everything that debilitates against life? Yes. A man who needed to be held accountable? Yes, but must we succumb to a spirit of bloodlust and self righteousness? In the midst of the war whoops, high fives and raised glasses, in the midst of all that, someone gently tugs on our sleeve and speaks those hard, sober words that call us back to our better selves, 'Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. God forgive them, they know not what they do. Put down the sword.'

"It seems we are quick to accept the idea of loving our enemies in the abstract, but that's about as far as we get. We resolve to love some vague, unnamed, ethereal enemy in the future, but never this enemy, the one who confronts us today."

That's the message of Jesus, a hard message, but it's the message of Easter because through love we can transform our world and we can rise to new life, share in that risen life of Jesus now, and prepare to share in it forever.

As we try to reflect on the death and resurrection of Jesus today, prompted by the Gospel lesson especially, I hope you will listen carefully at the Proclamation and the Eucharistic Prayer, where we come to the part where we proclaim Jesus brought us the Good News of life to be lived with Him forever in heaven, and He showed us the way to that life, the way of love. He has gone that way before us.

This morning as we hear those words, pray God that we will follow that way that Jesus had gone before us and we will open our hearts to the love that He brings into our world, and that we will begin more faithfully to share that love with everyone, even our enemies.

[Bishop Gumbleton gave this homily at St. Hilary Parish in Redford, Mich.]

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