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Love fulfills the whole law

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

In order to draw deeply from the Scriptures today, especially the Gospel, it's important for us to connect it with what we've heard in the Gospel on the last couple of Sundays, and I think you'll remember very readily a couple of Sundays ago when Jesus challenged his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" They were fumbling around until Peter stepped up and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Jesus praises him.

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He says, "You can't have discovered that on your own. Only God could have revealed that to you." So Jesus is very pleased with Peter and that is when He declares that Peter is the rock, the faith on which God's church will be built.

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time
Ezekiel 33:7-9
Psalm 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9
Romans 13:8-10
Matthew 18:15-20
Full text of the readings

Then last Sunday, that passage continues where Jesus takes up His journey again to go to Jerusalem. They had been on the way for a couple of weeks and He tells the disciples, "I'm going up to Jerusalem to be handed over to my enemies, to be tortured, and executed."

Peter says, "No, no, you don't have to do that." That's when Jesus says to Peter, "Get behind me, you Satan! You're thinking not according to God's ways, but human ways."

Then He says to Peter and all the disciples, "If you want to be My disciple, you must deny your very self and follow Me."

I presume all of us here want to be disciples of Jesus. So we have that challenge presented to us. "If you

want to be My disciple, deny your very self, take up your cross and follow Me."

Now I think years ago -- and it's still true for some of us -- when we hear, "Deny yourself," we think of things like when we used to not eat meat on Friday, we denied ourselves the pleasure of meat, or we found other ways to do some penance, like giving up candy in Lent perhaps.

But what Jesus means is much more than that. It's very profound. It's not just giving up something for a while, but rather, changing your whole life so that you live according to His values.

It's a profound thing. St. Paul, in writing to the Church at Philippi, points out, "You must have the mind of Jesus. If you're going to be a disciple of His, you must have this mind in you which was in Christ Jesus, who though He was God, emptied Himself, became human, and gave Himself over to death, the terrible death of the cross."

That's Jesus who empties Himself. If you want to follow Him, you have to begin to enter into that attitude of Jesus, the mind, the heart, the spirit of Jesus.

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In this 28th chapter of Matthew's Gospel, we begin to have Jesus instruct us on what it really means to be a disciple of His.

Now before the passage that we hear today, Jesus said to the disciples, "If you want to be My disciple, you must be like a little child." He took a child and He put them right in the midst of the disciples. He said, "Unless you become like this little child, you can't enter into the Reign of God."

He wasn't speaking about the innocence of the child. We all have that sense of how beautiful and innocent a tiny baby is, and we rejoice in that. He was talking about the fact that in His time, especially under the Roman occupation, children had no rights. They were powerless.

So if you wanted to be a disciple of Jesus, you have to begin to be ready to give up any idea of domination over another.

We must do that individually. In our relationships there has to be total mutuality if we're going to be friends. In a marriage relationship, there has to be mutuality, not one dominating another.

That's very hard to do, but Jesus says that's what we have to do if we're going to be his disciples: give up this sense of power. We have to do that individually, but don't you think it would be important also for us as a community, as a nation, not to think that we dominate the world, that we have the largest army and spend the most on military equipment, forces and training than any other country in the world. Why?

Disciples of Jesus don't need weapons. They don't drive for power. It's a hard lesson, but Jesus says the other way to do it is through love.

That's the first thing He tells us, "If you want to be My disciple, you must be one who is willing to be powerless," like Jesus who said, "I, when I am lifted up," and He meant on the cross, totally powerless, "I will draw all people to Myself."

He never coerces. He never uses force or power. He draws by what Pope John Paul used to call the fascinating power of love. That's all.

That's hard, but that's part of being a disciple of Jesus.

Again, in this 18th chapter where Matthew is instructing the church, He goes on to speak about a shepherd who loses one sheep out of 100, but he leaves the 99 and goes to look for that one sheep, the vulnerable one.

That's the way God acts. God is always reaching out to the most vulnerable. That's the way Jesus was. He reached out to the vulnerable, the poor and those who were afflicted in any way.

If we're going to be disciples of Jesus we, too, must look around and see who are the vulnerable in our midst.

Of course, in the situation in which we are right now, I guess we would think of the 17 million people who have been unemployed, many of them for more than six months. Our unemployment rate continues to be over 9 percent.

There are many people who are very vulnerable. As individuals and as a society, we must be looking out for them. That's the way Jesus was. We have to be like Jesus.

Finally, today, we get this example of someone who has offended another, and for Jesus, there was hardly anything more important than reconciling.

In one of the earlier discourses of Jesus, the one we call the Sermon on the Mount, He pointed out, "If your brother or sister has anything against you, you must go and be reconciled with your brother or sister, even if you're bringing your gift to the altar and coming to worship God, and you remember your brother or sister has something against you, go and be reconciled. Only then come and offer your gift."

That's what Jesus is talking about in this sermon to the church in the 18th chapter of Matthew. He's telling us, "Yes, if there is a grievance between you and another, go and confront the person." The person should be held accountable, but if the person won't admit the wrong and you can't be reconciled, then Jesus says, "Bring two or three witnesses so that it becomes clear what the facts are." If the person still won't be accountable, take it to the whole community, and the community has the power to bind or loose, as Jesus tells them.

If then there is still not reconciliation, Jesus says -- and this sounds so harsh -- "If they won't listen to the church, then regard that one as a Pagan or a Publican, like a tax collector." That sounds very harsh. It sounds like what some churches call shunning, "Drive the person away." That really isn't what Jesus is telling us.

Look what Jesus does in the Gospels to the Publicans and the Gentiles, those who are not members of the chosen people.

Earlier in the Gospel, Jesus is called to the home of an army captain. This would be a Roman soldier, a Gentile, one not a member of the Jewish people, and the captain comes and asks Jesus to come and heal his servant. Jesus says, "I'll come and do it." The captain says, "I'm not worthy. Just give an order and my boy will be healed," but Jesus says, "No." He goes into the house of the Pagan to do an act of love.

There is a passage that comes up in the Gospel earlier this year about when Jesus went into the Gentile

territory, among the Pagans and Gentiles. A woman comes up to Him, begging Him to heal her daughter. First He says, "No," but then she insists and He says, "Yes. Your faith has made her whole."

What Jesus shows us is that nobody is every pushed away, even if the person will not accept responsibility for the wrong that's been done and has hurt you. You still must forgive, and treat that person like Jesus treated the Gentiles and the Publicans, the tax collectors. He made them His friends and drew them back.

To be a disciple of Jesus is very challenging, and so it's important for us to reflect on what the Gospels tell us, especially today's Gospel, and the other places in the Gospel where Jesus always reaches out to the poor, the vulnerable and the suffering, and pours forth love upon them.

Perhaps, if we're going to be that disciple of Jesus, we should make sure that we carry home with us in our hearts what Paul has told us this evening, "Let this be the only debt of one to another, because the one who loves a neighbor has fulfilled the whole law."

Love cannot do the neighbor any harm, so love fulfills the whole law.

We must try to leave here tonight with a commitment to reach out in love, within our families, our neighborhoods, our country and the world, in order to fulfill that law of Jesus: Love one another as I have loved you.

That is the way we will be His disciples.

[This homily was given at St. Ann Parish in Frankfort, Mich.]

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