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Love and sacrifice are necessary to truly accept Jesus

by Thomas Gumbleton
 The Peace Pulpit

As we listen to today's scripture lessons, one of the most important parts for us to reflect upon is the part where Peter is standing before the Sanhedrin, the religious leaders of God's people, and declares to them, "You and all the people of Israel must know that this cripple stands before you, cured through the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene. You had him crucified yet God raised him from the dead. So Jesus is the stone rejected by you, the builders. This stone has become the cornerstone."

These are harsh words that Peter is saying to those Jewish religious leaders. He's telling them, "You have rejected the very one on whom God's whole temple, the living temple of God's people, is built. You have rejected the cornerstone of this building of God's people." Now when we hear that harsh judgment -- I know this is true of myself -- I want to say, "How could they not have known? How could they not have wanted to accept Jesus as the foundation stone?"

I give myself, and I think many of us do this -- we certainly haven't rejected Jesus; and yet I wonder. It makes me think of the parable that Jesus told during his public life, the parable about the two sons. The father had given them a task to carry out. The one son says, "Oh, yes, of course. I will do it right away," and then he goes off and actually doesn't do it. The other son says, "No, I'm not going to do that," but then he goes off and evidently thinks it over and decides, "Yes, I will do it."

Which of those, Jesus asks in the parable, is the one who is obedient to the father? Of the readings understand it is the second one, the one who says, "No," but then does the work that the father has given him. This may seem harsh as a judgment also, but I think of myself and suggest that it might be true of many of us. We're like that first son. "Oh, yes, we accept Jesus. We haven't rejected him," and yet, when it comes down to faithfully carrying out what Jesus taught us, and the example Jesus gave us, I'm not so

Fourth Sunday of Easter
Acts 4:8-12
Psalms 118:1, 8-9, 21-23, 26, 28, 29
1 John 3:1-2
John 10:11-18
Further of the readings

sure that we aren't more like the first son than the second son.

We say, "Yes," but have we really followed Jesus? Listen to today's Gospel. What is Jesus telling us? "I am the Good Shepherd. I know mine and mine know me." This is a very intimate relationship between Jesus, the Good Shepherd, and those who really follow him, those who are really the flock that Jesus is really leading and guiding. Do we have that kind of relationship with Jesus where we keep on trying to know him better and better, even as he knows us with full, intimate knowledge?

That would happen if we really were consistent in prayer, consistent in trying to listen to Jesus as he speaks to us through the Gospels and through the example of his life. Do we really know Jesus, and are we really consistent in our efforts to enter into this kind of relationship with Jesus? Beyond that, what about the example that Jesus gives us? I lay down my life for my sheep. I do it freely. The love of Jesus is unconditional and it's without limit.

No one loves another more than the one who is willing to lay down their life for them. Jesus spoke those words at the Last Supper. "Greater love than this no one has than to lay down your life for another." The love of Jesus is something that is extraordinary, again, unlimited, without condition. Do we really try to love that way also? Paul, in writing to the Christian community at Corinth, says to them, "Here am I, preaching a crucified Christ." Paul goes on to say to the Jews, it's a scandal. To the Greeks, it's foolishness, a Christ who actually doesn't retaliate or seek vengeance, a Christ who forgives, even those putting him to death.

It's unbelievable love, and that's the Christ we say we follow. Perhaps certainly in words we say, "Yes, Jesus," but do we live that way? Are our actions consistent with our words? Are we willing to give up power, domination over others? Willing to reach out in reconciliation, forgiveness and love to those who hurt us, be the first to reach out and reconcile? In our individual lives, in our families, in our neighborhoods or our workplace, are we really trying to model the love that Jesus has or in our national life?

Why is it that we as a people seem so often to turn to war, to use power to try to resolve the problems that arise between ourselves and other nations? We have had war without almost any cessation since 1991. The first Persian Gulf War, and then when that was over, we imposed sanctions that went on for 12 and a half years to dominate the country of Iraq, and it brought about the death of a million and a half people. Half of them were children, and then there was a second Persian Gulf War and a war in Afghanistan. These are the longest wars in our history.

Why is this if we really follow Jesus and the spirit of Jesus permeated our individual lives, our lives without society? I'm not so sure we have truly accepted Jesus. I lay down my life. I am the Good Shepherd. I love without limit. That is a challenge, and my guess is that every one of us has some need to check on ourselves and see how close we're coming to living that way of love that Jesus has shown us. Also, there is another very challenging thing.

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This is what we discover in the Acts of the Apostles. If we read a little further on from our passage today, we come to the part where St. Luke describes this history of the early Christian community gathered together in Jerusalem and trying to follow Jesus. The whole community of believers was one in heart and mind. No one claimed private ownership of any private possessions, but rather, they shared all things in common. With great power, the apostles bore witness to the resurrection of Jesus, for all of them were

living in an exceptional time of grace.

Luke goes on to say that there was no needy person among them because those who owned land or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of the sale and laid it at the feet of the apostles, who distributed it according to each one's need. That didn't go on indefinitely, but the first community tried so hard to live up to the challenge of Jesus, "Avoid greed of every kind." They operated on the premise that came to them from the Hebrew scriptures, that God made the world for all, not for a few.

Isn't that the message that we've been hearing from the Occupy Wall Street movement? One percent has an overwhelming amount of the wealth in our country, and 99 percent struggle in varying degrees, of course, but even just to have the basic attitude that God made the world for all and not just a few, and they don't understand private ownership to be an unlimited, absolute right because everything is God's, and every person has a right to the resources of this planet in order to have a full, human life.

These are rights that every individual human being, made in the image and likeness of God has, the right to a full, human life and all that it takes to make that happen. Is our society like that? In my own heart, am I like that, that I don't cling to what is mine, but rather understand that whatever I have is gift from God? It is not for me alone, but for the good of all. Yes, if we are to follow Jesus, follow his way, the attitude that we have toward wealth -- in our culture, wealth is made so important. Everybody is encouraged to have more and more and we actually give less and less.

The teachings of Jesus, if we accept them and live according to them, then we can rightly say, "No, I haven't rejected Jesus, the cornerstone. I understand what Jesus has taught and I'm trying to follow his way again, that way of love, that way of love for God but also love for our brothers and sisters," the love that is shown by how we try to make sure everyone has enough. If we listen deeply to these scripture passages today, I think the challenge is very clear.

For every one of us, we have to keep on being converted more deeply to the way of Jesus. If we do, then perhaps what we heard in our second lesson today from that first letter of John will be something that will really become true of us, what John speaks about God's love for us. "See what singular love God has for us. We are called children of God, sons and daughters of God, and we really are." This becomes true when we follow the way of Jesus, the unique son of God. We are called children of God and we really are.

John goes on to say to that first Christian community, "We are God's children, and what we shall be has not yet been shown." The singular love that God has for us by allowing us, making us and creating us to be sons and daughters of God, that's not the end. It goes even beyond that. What we shall be has not yet been shown, yet when Jesus appears in glory, we know that we shall be like him. We will come to the fullness of what we can be as a human person, made in the image and likeness of God. This happens and will happen as we continue to try to follow the way of Jesus, truly accept him and truly follow him.

[Homily given at St. Hilary Parish, Redford, Mich. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. **Sign up here** to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

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