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Choosing to follow Jesus in every way is a hard choice

by Thomas Gumbleton
 The Peace Pulpit

As I mentioned at the beginning of the reading of the Gospel, this concludes a series of five Gospels that we've had now where Jesus started by first performing what John calls a sign, a sign that John at the conclusion of this Gospel says, "There were many of these signs given that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God." So this extraordinary event that took place in the desert was a sign of who Jesus really is.

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Now we come to the end of the instructions that Jesus gave in reflecting upon that sign. As John points out, many of the people who came to hear what Jesus said decided it's too hard to stay. It's too hard. We can't believe it. We can't accept first that this is a sign that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God. To them, he was just another human being, one like them. In fact, you might remember a Sunday ago, they said, "Is this not the son of Mary? Do we not know his mother and sisters? He's just one of us."

So it's hard saying that this is Jesus, son of God, as well as son of Mary. Also, for these past Sundays, Jesus proclaimed, "I am the living bread come down from heaven." They understood that because in the Jewish tradition, the living bread, the manna in the desert, was the teaching of God. So Jesus is proclaiming, "What I say is the very word of God, the teaching of God." He expects his disciples, his followers, all those who have been with him that ran around the shore of the lake to catch up with him when he left after that miracle.

He said to them, "My teaching is the teaching of God." As they reflect on his teaching, they begin to say, "No, it's too hard. How can we accept that he is the son of God?" It's also the teachings that he gives and

Two Joyful Sundays in Ordinary Time
 Joshua 24:1-2a, 15-17, 18b
 Psalms 34:2-3, 16-17, 18-19, 20-21
 Ephesians 5:21-32
 OR Ephesians 5:2a; 25-32
 John 6:60-69
 Full text of the readings

has given in the other Gospels that is brought out even more clearly, about his work. His first service is to the poor, and they are supposed to follow him. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus makes it very plain: "I come to proclaim good news to the poor, to give the blind new sight, to heal the brokenhearted, to set the downtrodden free. I'm coming to raise people up, those who are most oppressed and overburdened," especially through injustice or through unjust treatment that brings about poverty.

There is part of his teaching where he expects us and those first disciples to understand that he was one who declared, "Don't just love those who love you. Love your enemy." That really is a hard saying, isn't it, to forgive and to be the first to forgive, to reach out in reconciliation. These are the hard things of Jesus' teachings. When he says, "Will you go away?" he's saying, "Are you going to listen to me as your teacher and be a disciple, or will you be like those who say, 'No, those sayings are too hard. We can't accept it.'?"

In our second lesson today, it's a passage that sometimes causes a lot of distress to people because it's used as a passage that would seem to indicate that women are to be subject to men. Wives, be subject to your husband. Sometimes in the translation, it's not made clear what Paul is really saying, because at the very beginning of that passage, what happened is, as it was translated, one long sentence was broken down into separate sentences.

So it seems like Paul is giving different instructions to men and to women, but really, it's all one sentence, and it starts, "Be subject to one another out of reverence and obedience to God." So husbands are to love their wives. Wives are to love their husbands. It is to be mutual and equal. We still struggle with that whole idea of full equality for women in our church. We recently had that incident where the bishops tried to take over the leadership group of women religious.

They resisted because they are full human beings, full adults, equal in freedom and dignity, and are not to be subject to male bishops. Many people in the church find that a hard saying, that everyone is equal. Paul had declared that so clearly in his letter to the church at Galatia. He says, "Among the disciples of Jesus there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, rich nor poor."

All are one in Christ. Now that's a hard saying again, to really treat everyone with mutual love and equality. These are the kinds of hard sayings that the people at this point in John's Gospel are saying no to. Our first lesson today reminded us that this is not the first time that God challenges God's people. That happened long ago with that incident where Joshua says to the people, "Are you going to serve the one, true God or choose other gods?"

Joshua says, "I and my family, we know who we're going to choose and serve. What about you?" The people were faithful. They said, "Yes, we will follow our living God, Yahweh." That's the same question that is being posed to all of us this morning. If you listen to the Gospel carefully, and I'm sure you picked up on it, but Jesus is very sad.

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This incident happened after he had already been with his disciples for quite a long time. He shared so much. He loved them. They were friends, and yet, some of them are saying, "No, what he's teaching is too hard. We won't accept it." So Jesus asks them this morning, and since the word of God is a living God, it's being asked of each one of us. Will you also go away? Will you refuse to accept those hard sayings?

Maybe from a distance, you will be an admirer of Jesus because of what he taught and how he lived that out himself, but you won't really be a disciple, one who chooses to follow him in every way. That's our

choice this morning. It's a hard choice. When we come forward to receive the Eucharist, that's the moment when we really can say, "Yes, I accept Jesus, this living bread, the body and blood of Christ, the son of God, and I will follow Jesus who teaches the way to everlasting life."

So the question is there. Will you go away or will you follow Jesus? As we celebrate this Eucharist, we pray that each of us will reach down deeply into our spirit of faith and be able to say yes to Jesus, yes to all that he is, the son of Mary and son of God, and to all that he teaches, even the hardest of his teachings.

[Homily given at St. Hilary Parish in 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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