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It is not easy to be a disciple of Jesus

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

I think we can gather from our listening to the Scriptures this morning that the message today is about being a disciple of Jesus -- our call to follow him -- and maybe some of us are somewhat like Elisha. We say yes, but then we hesitate, and we're not so sure if we really want to be this disciple of Jesus. But if we listen carefully and turn to God for help, I think we can leave the church today with a firm commitment to be disciples of Jesus, which could mean radical change in our lives.

I think we get a better understanding of today's Scriptures if we remember last Sunday. Remember where Jesus challenged the disciples: "Who do people say I am?" and they said, "Well, some say you're Elijah or John the Baptist," and so on. Then he said, "Who do you say I am?" and Peter said, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God," and we were asked to make that same proclamation. Jesus is saying to each of us, "Who do you say I am?" and if we answered Jesus by saying, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God," well, then, we know this is the one we should follow. "You are the Messiah" -- but then there was a danger that they would misunderstand, and they did.

Jesus begins to tell them, "Look, if you're going to follow me, you must deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me." He told them, "I'm going into Jerusalem, and there they'll hand me over to my enemies. I'll be scourged, tortured, executed, and then rise on the third day." Remember what Peter did? He said, "No, no, you don't have to do that." I'm sure he was thinking of Jesus as a Messiah like David the king, and he had all the followers by this time.

They could easily begin a revolution against the Roman Empire, and that's what Peter was looking for. Jesus said to Peter, "Get behind me, you Satan! You're an obstacle. You're not listening to God's way; you're trying to follow a human way." After that rebuke, then Peter did follow Jesus, and that's what we're being asked to do today, to follow Jesus, but it's going to require some change in our lives. The first thing

Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
I Kings 19:16b, 19-21
Psalms 16:1-2, 5, 7-8, 9-10, 11
Galatians 5:1, 13-18
Luke 9:51-62
Full text of the readings

I think that we're asked to change is our attitude about the use of power or violence.

They're going into this Samaritan village. The Samaritans hated the Jews at this time with a special kind of very profound religious conflict, and religious conflicts are often the most violent, the most hate-filled; as strange as that may seem, it's true. Samaritans hated Jews, Jews hated Samaritans, so the Samaritans said, "We don't want anything to do with you Jews." Then John and James -- the sons of thunder, they're called -- [said,] "Let's bring down lightning from heaven and destroy those cities!" and Peter says, "No, no, no, let's just go, and we'll come back another time. We'll leave; no violence," and so they do.

That's the first lesson that Jesus is giving to us as disciples of Jesus. We must give up violence [and] let ourselves be handed over to our enemies, if that's what's called for at some point, like Jesus. Give up our lives, like Jesus, but we don't really do that very well, I think.

A couple of weeks ago, I had the occasion to reread the Catholic bishops' pastoral letter of 1983 called "The Challenge of Peace," and in one part of that letter, the bishops are saying, "In the following pages, we should like to spell out some of the implications of being a community of disciples of Jesus in a time when our nation is heavily armed with nuclear weapons and is engaged in a continuing development of new weapons, together with strategies for their use." Here we are, a nation; we call ourselves Christians, don't we? Yet we're a nation that has 20,000 nuclear weapons, 3,500 on hair-trigger alert, ready to be used at any instant. [We can] destroy the whole world in a half-hour.

So what are the implications of being Christian when we're living in a nation that's so heavily armed with weapons of mass destruction and a commitment to use them? There has to be some change in our thinking. There has to be some change in our attitudes if we're going to follow Jesus, who rejects violence. He did not want to be a Messiah who's going to conquer with armies or with might. He was the Messiah who's going to transform our world through love, the transforming power of love.

We have a marvelous example today. Nelson Mandela is dying, as we all know, in South Africa. President [Barack] Obama and his wife and two daughters -- he took them on this trip because he wanted them to meet this man because he's such a symbol of what should be in this world. In Nelson Mandela's autobiography called *The Long Road to Freedom*, he said: "During those 27 long years of imprisonment, I came to understand that I had to work as hard for the freedom of the oppressors as for the freedom of my own people because anyone who oppresses another is a prisoner of hatred."

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Anyone who wants to use power, oppress another person, is a prisoner of hatred in their heart, and so Nelson Mandela says, "I have to love my enemies." He came out of that 27 years of imprisonment -- 18 years of solitary confinement, which would destroy most people -- committed to give up violence, and he did. That nation was transformed. It's not a perfect nation by any means -- lots of poverty and injustice and suffering still -- but they brought about a revolution without violence.

That's an example for us today because that really is following the way of Jesus: Giving up violence and power. That's probably the biggest challenge that we have if we're really going to say yes to Jesus, yes to being his disciple. Then there are a couple of other things in the Gospel today. In case that's not enough to challenge us, there's more.

When the people are saying, "We're willing to follow Jesus," and one person comes and says, "I'll follow you," Jesus says, "Well, wait a minute. You better look and see what you're asking or what you're willing

to do. Birds in the air have their nests, foxes have their holes where they can reside; the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Jesus is homeless; he's poor. He lives a very simple life. "If you want to follow me," we have to begin to bring more simplicity into our lives.

Don't we have a great example in Pope Francis? He's giving up a lot of those trappings that have accumulated over the years for the papacy. He doesn't ride around in a big limousine all by himself; he doesn't live apart by himself in a palace; he doesn't dress in the extra robes that became so fashionable for popes. He's showing us that it's important to live a simple life so that other people have enough to live on. We've accumulated in this nation too much for ourselves, and other rich nations, too, whereas four-fifths of the world is in dire poverty. So we have to find a way, if we're going to follow Jesus, for simplicity of life.

Then there's the urgency of the call. The one came and said, "Well, wait a minute, I'll follow you, but I have to go and take care of a few things first," and Jesus says, "No, no, right now. Follow me." Then the example of the people who want to put it off for a while and maybe begin to follow, and then drop by the wayside. Jesus said, "Once you put your hand to the plow, you can't turn back," so we need to make a commitment that is real and that is permanent as we can make it and say we will follow Jesus.

That's the challenge that's given to us today: Do I want to be a disciple of Jesus? If I do, will I begin to look deeply into his way of life, his values, his teachings, and commit myself to follow them? Truly being a disciple of Jesus is not an easy thing, and so maybe most of all during this Eucharist, we should pray that we will hear God's call, that we will be willing to follow Jesus, live according to his way, his values, and never turn back.

I'm sure that if we ask for the grace to do that, the spirit of Jesus will come upon us and we will leave the church today more committed than ever to be disciples of Jesus and to join with him the work of bringing about the reign of God through the fascinating power of love and love alone.

[Homily given at St. Hilary, Detroit. 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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