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Through forgiveness, love, we can overcome violence

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

Before we go further with the celebration of the Sacraments, it's important that we spend at least a short time, a few minutes, on listening deeply to the Scripture lessons today because they will help us to understand ? for the candidates, what you're pledging yourself to do today, what this Sacrament means for you. For all the rest of us, it can help us to understand what it means that we have been baptized and confirmed, and that we are currently disciples of Jesus, and so it really is important for all of us to listen to the Scripture lesson.

<p>The first thing that comes to my mind is about Peter. In that first lesson this afternoon, Peter was there in the city of Jerusalem, but evidently hundreds, if not thousands of people, gathered in the streets because they had heard the sound of the wind and the tongues of flame coming down. Peter gets out there and starts to preach to them, telling them who Jesus was, why he was put to death, and why he has risen from the dead.</p> <p>He preaches very boldly, courageously, and remember this is the same Peter who had denied Jesus. Jesus had even said, "Look, before the cock crows three times during this night, you will deny me," and Peter said, "I won't deny you," but then he did.</p>	<p>Acts 2:14, 22-23 Psalms 16:1-2, 5, 7-8, 9-10, 11 Peter 1:1-3 Lk 22:31-32 Full text of the readings</p>
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Can you imagine what that would mean if someone said, who had been a friend, a close companion for years, "I don't know you; I have no idea who this person is." See, and that's what Peter did three times. The last time was just a young servant girl, and he's afraid; afraid! "I don't know the man!", and then he and all the other disciples ran. They scattered, and they're in hiding, in fact, on Easter Sunday night. They're in hiding because they're afraid, and then spirit comes upon them and that changes everything.

I think it's especially important again to reflect on St. Peter, and in the Gospel of St. John, there's a little different version of when the spirit was poured forth upon the disciples. Last Sunday's Gospel, in fact, John tells us that Easter Sunday night they're all hiding in this upper room where they had celebrated the Passover meal with Jesus. They're hiding; suddenly Jesus is in their midst, and the first thing he says to them is, "Peace be with you. Peace be with you."

Then he breathes on them, gives them the Holy Spirit: "As God has sent me, I send you," so they received the Holy Spirit. They're changed dramatically, and so Peter now is ready to stand up and proclaim who Jesus is. He's not afraid anymore. He's received those gifts of the Holy Spirit "wisdom and understanding" and courage. Now we take love and fear of God. So he had changed dramatically because the Holy Spirit gives him the courage and the strength and the love to do it.

That's the same Holy Spirit who will descend upon this church in the Sacrament of Confirmation this afternoon. But you know, I think what may have been even more important for Peter "it's part of receiving the Holy Spirit" but Jesus also said to Peter and the other disciples when he said, "Peace be with you," he was showing them his love. He wanted to be reconciled with them. They had run away; they had failed dramatically. He comes back to them; they don't have to go beg his forgiveness. He comes to them, forgives them, and shows them, "I love you, no matter what."

See, and I think that's when he would change people "the fact that he now experienced that unlimited, unconditional love of Jesus, who is God, for him and for all the disciples. Once they knew that love of God and that forgiveness of God, they were filled with the spirit of Jesus. They were dramatically changed. And again, that's the same spirit that will come upon this church this afternoon.

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But when we are changed by the Holy Spirit, it means that we have to try to live more faithfully according to the way of Jesus. If we listen to the Gospel lesson today carefully and really understand the circumstances of that story "with the two disciples leaving Jerusalem in total discouragement, without any hope. They've lost their dearest friend. He's been executed, ignominiously hanging on a cross like a criminal, and they're totally distraught.

Jesus comes along; walks with them. They don't understand it's Jesus, and he begins to ask them, "Well, what's the problem? Why are you so upset?" So they tell him, "Are you the only one that doesn't know what happened the last couple of days?" They said, "Well, don't you know about Jesus of Nazareth?", and they said, "We thought he was the one who was going to restore Israel." See, they had expected Jesus to lead a revolution "to overthrow the Romans who were occupying the Holy Land and persecuting, oppressing the chosen people. "We thought he was the one."

In the Gospel of Luke, they're going to the town of Emmaus. Well, 166 years before that, the chosen people had been oppressed, and they were being invaded. A small army under Judas Maccabeus went out to confront the enemy in war, and they defeated the enemy so that the chosen people were now free. They

thought that's what Jesus ... 'We thought Jesus would do,' and that's why Jesus was so disappointed.

He said, 'Oh, you foolish people,' and he began to go through the Scriptures with them, showing them how he, the Messiah, had to suffer, had to be persecuted, had to be executed, put to death. But in the process of all of that, never stopping loving, even those who were putting him to death. Remember, he had taught us 'Don't just love those who love you, love your enemy,' and that's what he showed us. That's what he wanted the people to understand 'that you don't overcome violence and hatred with more violence, more hatred.

That's probably the most radical part of the teaching of Jesus 'that we have to overcome evil with good, hatred with love, violence with nonviolence. It's the only way, and that's the way of Jesus. Jesus then instructed these disciples, 'I didn't come to do what Judas Maccabeus said. I reject violence; I reject war. I am showing you a different way, the way of love.' That's the only way we will transform the violence in our world into a peaceful world. We must begin to learn that lesson 'the most radical lesson of Jesus.

Last Sunday you remember, I'm sure all of us are aware, Pope John XXIII was canonized as Saint John the XXIII, Pope John Paul II, Saint John Paul II. Both of those popes 'now saints whom we venerate, try to imitate because they were following Jesus faithfully 'were known above all for the way they rejected violence and war.

John XXIII, a month before he died, published an Encyclical letter called *Pacem in Terris, Peace on Earth*. He demonstrated the way 'the only way 'we can make peace happen on the earth, transform our world into a peaceful world. And that Encyclical letter of John XXIII was recognized and acclaimed by people all over the world. He addressed it not just to Catholics, Christians. He addressed it to all people of good will, and they listened. There was a short time when his message was really being taught and spread throughout the world.

And John Paul II 'time after time he rejected war. One of his most famous statements he put in an Encyclical letter that he published in 1991: 'I myself in the recent occasion of the Persian Gulf War, repeated the cry, 'Never again war! No, never again war!' because it destroys the lives of innocent people, throws into upheaval the lives of those who do the killing, and always leaves behind a trail of hatred and resentment to make it all the more difficult to resolve the very problems that caused the war.' He was very strong in his teaching.

But there was one time, and it was just within months of when he died. The last time Pope John Paul II made one of his trips to another country, he went to Spain in May of 2004. When he was in Spain, as he often did on those trips, he had a special gathering with young people 'people like all of you who are being confirmed this afternoon 'and he spoke with great fervor to them. There was an article in the paper and the reporter describes John Paul. He's really dying at this point, and the reporter says, 'Still filled with the palpable sadness over the war in Iraq.'

This was the second Persian Gulf War which he had tried so hard to convince the leaders on both sides not to go to war, so he was sad because they had gone to war. So when he went to Spain, he spoke before hundreds of thousands of people and the reporter said, 'What he desperately wanted for the world was peace, repeating that word so often that it became a mantra. He kept saying, 'We need peace! The world needs peace! There must be peace! No more war!?' He kept saying that with fervor.

But then the next day when he spoke to the young people, here's what he said: 'Blessed young people, you well know how concerned I am about peace in the world.' Then he spoke with great distress about what he called a spiral of violence 'terrorists, hatred, war 'and he pleaded with the young people: 'Respond to violence with the fascinating power of love. Respond to violence with the fascinating power

of love. Keep yourselves far, far from every form of exaggerated nationalism, racism ? and intolerance.?

Finally, he said to them, ?Be artisans of peace.? A beautiful way to express what all of us are called to be ? artisans of peace ? people who dream about how could peace happen, who have a vision. That?s what an artist does; an artist has a vision. A piece is marveled and he can see a figure, and then he makes it come out. Or a vision ? has a vision or a dream of a beautiful painting, and then makes it happen.

Be artisans of peace; dream about how we could make peace happen. Have a vision ? the vision of Jesus ? that through forgiveness and love, we can overcome violence. When we live in a culture of violence, it?s almost overwhelming, but the message of Jesus shows us the way.

So this evening, as we celebrate this Sacrament of Confirmation, I appeal to all of us to listen deeply to what our Scriptures tell us today, what Jesus taught us, and what now the church is teaching us so clearly: The only way to overcome violence and hatred and killing and war is through the transforming power of love. That?s the message that these Scriptures teach us, that our new saints teach us, and that we must try to follow if we?re going to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, filled with his Holy Spirit ? the spirit of reconciliation, the spirit of love.

[Homily given at St. Alexander's in Farmington, 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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