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Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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The Peace Pulpit

As we reflect on the gospel lesson today, it's important, I think, for us to remember the context within which this event in that synagogue in Capernaum happens. The context, of course, is from our first lesson today, where Moses told the people, as Moses was about to die, "Yahweh said to me, 'I shall raise up a prophet from their midst, one of their own brothers who will be like you. I will put words into his mouth and he will tell them all that I command.' " Of course, we are to understand that this prophet that God promised, that now begins his public life, is Jesus. He's the one who's to come after Moses who is greater than Moses, greater than all the former teachers of the Law.

I think we understand this gospel better also, if we recall the ways that Jesus begins his public life in all of the other three gospels, because in each gospel, there's a slightly different way in which Jesus begins. It's the gospel writers' way of showing us who Jesus really is. We remember that, of course, the community by the time these gospels were written, had already experienced Jesus as alive; they believed in him because of the resurrection, so the events that happened in the gospels are not to prove Jesus is God, but to show us the kind of God Jesus is, the kind of God we worship.

If you look in John's gospel, John begins the public life of Jesus with a very famous miracle that I'm sure we all remember hearing at various times -- the story about the wedding feast at Cana in Galilee, where Jesus took those vessels of water and transformed them into wine. John says this was the first of the signs that Jesus performed. It was a sign of who Jesus is. He is this greater prophet that Moses talked about, who now shows that he is here to transform the old covenant of the chosen people into a new covenant, just as the water is transformed into wine in the midst of a glorious, beautiful and gentle wedding feast, a

symbol of the fullness of God's kingdom.

So Jesus is the one who teaches us how we transform that covenant God made with the chosen people at Mount Sinai, and now becomes the covenant we make with God through Jesus, through his sufferings, death and resurrection, which we celebrate every time we gather for the Eucharist. John shows Jesus as the one transforming the old covenant into this new covenant and blood, the very love of Jesus.

Luke shows Jesus beginning his public life in the synagogue at Nazareth. Luke begins with Jesus preaching from the text of Isaiah, where Jesus takes as his own, the work proclaimed by Isaiah to proclaim good news to the poor, to reach out to the poor, to heal the broken-hearted, give the blind new sight, make the downtrodden free, proclaim God's year of favor.

Luke has a Jesus who fulfills the role of Moses by compassion and love, reaching out with sensitivity to all people, but especially to the poor and the oppressed.

Matthew's gospel shows us Jesus beginning his public life growing up on the hillside, like Moses did on Mount Sinai. Jesus becomes the new lawgiver. 'You have heard that it was said of old, 'Thou shalt not kill.' I say to you, you must not even be angry in your heart toward a brother or sister. You must always be quick to reconcile. You've heard that it was said of old, 'Love your neighbor, hate your enemy.' I say to you, 'love your enemy.' So Jesus is the new lawgiver, taking the laws God proclaimed through Moses and transforming them into laws that are based on love, going far beyond the laws of the commandments -- a whole new set of values that Jesus urges upon his disciples.

In the gospel today from Mark, we see Jesus fulfilling that word of Moses, becoming the new prophet, only this time it's to resist and overcome evil in the world. Jesus is shown as the one who has this power to transform evil into goodness. We have to listen very carefully to the passage today and understand something of its context in this sense, that at the time of Jesus, people (and the scriptures themselves show this), personified evil. That's why we hear about demons possessing the man. Evil is not really a person. Evil is not really some entity we can destroy. Evil is always something we do, the way we act, and the way we interact. We do evil.

But often in the scriptures, abstract notions are personified, so for the Jewish people at the time of Jesus, demons were seen as the personification of evil. And if you want another example of something like that, I remind you of something that we know very well, how we personify goodness in the scriptures, or wisdom. In the book of Wisdom you'd find, 'Wisdom is luminous and never tarnished; she willingly lets herself be seen by those who love her, and known by those who look for her. She hastens to meet those who long for her. Seek her in the morning and you will not be disappointed; you will find her sitting at your door.'

Throughout the book of Wisdom, it's always a person, in this case a woman, who is the personification of wisdom. Wisdom is an abstract notion, but to try and help us understand it in the scriptures, it's personified.

The same thing is true of evil. That's why when Jesus turns to the man who is possessed, according to the likes of the people at the time of Jesus, Jesus interacts with this man. He doesn't just destroy the evil; he has to interact and the man recognizes who Jesus is, and he's open to being converted, and so he is.

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The people are astonished at how this kind of a change can happen, so dramatically, so quickly. But Jesus does have that power to transform evil into good.

This is the most important thing that we have to learn today from our gospel lesson, and that is that we too, as followers of Jesus, must work not to destroy evil. There's no way you can carry on a war against evil, a crusade to eradicate evil from the world, because evil is what you and I do, what others do, that is contrary to God's law of love. Something like war is always evil; it's a failure on the part of human beings. It's not something to be glorified, it's evil.

Someone who had a profound insight into this, as we would expect, I suppose, is Pope John Paul II. Perhaps you've heard this before, but I think it's such an extraordinary example of how he understood what had to be done when that terrible evil happened to us -- people perpetrated against us the destruction of 3,000 people and two huge buildings in New York City on Sept. 11, 2001. Pope John Paul II was deeply affected by that, as you can tell because a couple of months later, for the World Day of Peace in 2002, he published a statement about how we need to react to such a horrendous evil. He put it this way:

"?a world in which the power of evil seems once again to have taken the upper hand will in fact be transformed into a world in which the noblest aspirations of the human heart will triumph, a world in which true peace will prevail."

Isn't that what we wanted after 9/11? We wanted true peace, but we went to war, and we haven't found peace yet. But John Paul said something about this and what we should have done:

"Recent events, including the terrible killings just mentioned, move me to return to a theme which often stirs in the depths of my heart when I remember the events of history which have marked my life, especially my youth."

Remember, he grew up in World War II under Nazi tyranny and then 40 years of communist tyranny.

"The enormous suffering of peoples and individuals, even among my own friends and acquaintances,

caused by Nazi and Communist totalitarianism, has never been far from my thoughts and prayers. I have often paused to reflect on the persistent question: How do we restore the moral and social order subjected to such horrific violence?"

How are we going to make a world where true peace can prevail? He had thought about it a long time:

"My reasoned conviction, confirmed in turn by biblical revelation [by God's word], is that the shattered order cannot be fully restored except by a response that combines justice with forgiveness. The pillars of true peace are justice and that form of love which is forgiveness, enemy love."

What John Paul was telling us is that if we really want true peace to prevail, if we want to restore the shattered moral order, it won't be by going to war, trying to eradicate evil from the world; it will be because we engage with those who perpetrate the evil.

We do as Jesus did -- we confront it, but not by violence which only brings more violence. We confront it by forgiveness, understanding and love.

This is an extraordinary challenge to us and perhaps now we are in a different course, where we are trying to enter into relationships with the people of Israel and Palestine, with the people of Pakistan and soon with the people of Afghanistan, and perhaps with those of Iran in a short time. That's what we must do. We must reach out, interact, be ready to admit our own failings and be ready to forgive the failings of others. Then we can build a world where true peace will prevail.

The way of Jesus, this new prophet, is a very difficult way, it's a very challenging way. For most of us, it's probably almost an unbelievable way. Yet it is the only way, the way of God's love. St. Paul, in the second lesson today -- perhaps it wasn't totally clear when we listened to it -- when he talked about the man and his wife and the woman and her husband and so on, he was suggesting that no one get married anymore because the end times were here, and that's why he was very urgent. Well, the end times, we don't know when they're going to come. They could still be a long way off, of course, but the urgency that Paul was talking about is present.

We need to begin to act according to the way of Jesus, and we need to do that with great urgency, because the possibility of destruction in our world now through violence, through war, through terrorism, is almost unlimited. So it is urgent that we listen deeply to this new prophet who has come into our midst, who does show us the way to transform hatred and violence into love. This new prophet gives us the way to make true peace prevail in our world.

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