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## Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

First of all I thank the Knights and Ladies, Junior Knights and Junior Ladies for welcoming me here today and inviting me to celebrate this special Eucharist on the Feast of St. Peter Claver, your patron. It is a great honor to be with you, and I am very thankful that you have invited me to be here with you.

When we hear that Gospel lesson today, we, I am sure, are astounded at how harsh Jesus sounds. "You can't be my disciples if you don't hate your mother, your father, your spouse, your children. You can't be my disciples." What is happening? Well remember. Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem. He's about to be handed over to his enemies. He is going to be tortured. He is going to be executed. He is a dead man walking.

Yet here is this crowd still looking for signs and marvelous things. They're having a good time. They're not serious. They have not really listened. They think they are following Jesus, but they haven't really figured out what it might cost to be a disciple of Jesus.

How many of us are that way? Have we really taken the time to consider what it might mean to follow Jesus? How different we might have to be from those in the world around us? If we are really going to be a disciple of Jesus, can we really be just like everyone else? Or might we have to pay a price?

Back in World War II, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a great German theologian and Protestant minister, was in the resistance against Hitler. He was jailed. During the time in jail he wrote a book called the *Cost of Discipleship*

. For him the cost was execution, because he stood up against powers of evil. Again have we considered the cost for ourselves to really be a disciple of Jesus?

St. Paul in the second lesson today gives us a radical vision of what it means to follow Jesus. We don't know what cost Philemon might have had to pay, because we never hear a response to this letter from Paul. There probably was one, but it has never been kept, preserved. But Paul was asking Philemon to do something totally out of the ordinary. Roman law required that a run away slave had to be punished, even executed. Paul was sending Onesimus back and saying, "Look everything is different. Jesus has come. Jesus has made us all brothers and sisters. There can't be slave or free, male or female, rich or poor. We are all one in Jesus. So you must treat Onesimus different now. Go against the law. Free this person. He is your brother in Jesus."

That is the radical vision Jesus gives us, that we are all brothers and sisters. One human family. We cannot hate one another. We cannot do violence to one another.

St. Peter Claver was an extraordinary example of this. He lived in a time when our very own church condoned slavery. It's hard to believe in a way, but we know it is true. It happened in this country. Bishops owned slaves. Peter Claver lived in a time when that was very common. In fact, Africans were being brought over to Colombia where Peter Claver went to be a missionary. He ministered among them. He couldn't break the whole slave trade, but he went among the slaves and he said, "I will be a slave to the slaves. They are my brothers and sisters." He was demonstrating the vision of Jesus. He gave his life in total service to the slaves.

When we think about what is happening in our country right now - it's not hard to discern how we might have to be different, because we are living in time when our nation has been engaged in a war since 1991 really. We have devastated another country. We have killed hundreds of thousands of innocent civilian people. Pushed two million into exile. Destroyed their whole infrastructure. Caused suffering that is beyond comprehension. Now we are going to get a report before our Congress that is going to tell us, "Keep on going. Wage more war." And the president is going to address us this week and tell us that we have to persevere in war, in violence.

Is that the way of Jesus? Is that the vision of Jesus? Certainly not.

Martin Luther King Jr. showed us a totally different vision, which is the real vision of Jesus. We have to strive for peace within ourselves, seeking to be a peacemaker in our daily lives. We have to accept suffering rather than inflict suffering. How often he preached that. We have to refuse to retaliate in the face of provocation and violence. We must return love for violence, love for hatred. Dr. King paid a high price because he followed Jesus. He spoke out against the advice of his closest friends and colleagues. He said, "I must condemn the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today, my own government."

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It seems to me that this time in which we live it is ever more clear that we must follow the way of Dr. King, which is really the way of Jesus. A new vision, an extraordinary vision. We are all brothers and sisters in the human family. We must reach out in love to one another and in forgiveness. Love even our enemies, return good for evil. That is the vision, the vision of Jesus. Paul preached it to Philemon. Paul is preaching it to us.

Jesus shows us the way. He invites us, come follow me. But sit down first and think about what it might cost. Don't be like the builder who doesn't make those plans or like the king going into battle without knowing what will happen. No. Count the cost.

Then if you are ready to pay the price, if you're ready to pay the price it takes to follow Jesus, then this morning, once more as we celebrate this Eucharist, recommit yourself. When you come forward to receive the body of Christ and you say, "Amen," that should be a commitment to follow Jesus. Take up your cross and follow him no matter what the cost.

Can we do it? Well perhaps among many others we can pray this morning to St. Peter Claver, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, others who have shown us the way and we too will have the courage to count the costs and say yes I will pay that price. I will follow Jesus. His way of love. Rejecting all violence, all war. Follow only Jesus.

[Editor's Note: This homily was preached Sept. 9 at Sacred Heart Church in Detroit, Mich.]

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