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Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Oct. 11, 2007 The Peace Pulpit

When we first hear the Gospel lesson today, we might not catch the full intensity of that prayer of the disciples to Jesus, "Increase our faith." It seems to me they were probably almost desperate at this point. As I mentioned before, they'd been going with Jesus on this final journey to Jerusalem and they'd been listening to what he has said.

Long before this, earlier in the journey, he had urged them: "Follow me. If you want to be my disciple, take up your cross, follow me." A couple Sundays ago, you may remember Jesus said it's so important to follow him that you must do that, even if it means leaving your father, your mother, you sisters, your brothers, whatever, you have to follow me, I come first. Jesus is demanding very much of his disciples.

There was a point in the journey where Peter even argued with Jesus because Jesus had said, "I'm going to Jerusalem. I will be handed over to my enemies, they will torture me, put me to death," and Peter says, "No, no, that doesn't have to happen." Jesus says to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan!" Jesus is serious. He really wants us to follow him and to accept in our lives what he did -- accept suffering rather than inflict it, even be killed rather than kill.

Just before today's Gospel, Jesus had asked the disciples something that probably seems almost impossible. He says, "If your brother or sister offends you, rebuke them, but if they are sorry, forgive them. Even if they offend you seven times in a day, you must forgive them." Jesus asked so much. That's why the disciples are saying, "Please, give us faith. We need faith."

What do they mean by faith?

It's not just a list of doctrines to believe. We get up every Sunday after the liturgy of the word. We proclaim our belief in the mysteries of our faith. That's what we might call objective faith, the doctrines that we believe, but what we're really talking about here is subjective faith, our relationship to Jesus. What the disciples are asking: "Help us to come closer to you so we can be more like you, so we really can follow you."

That's the kind of faith they're asking for here -- a deepened understanding that Jesus is the visible presence of God in our midst, that he really is what Peter had declared, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God." They want that kind of faith that they know Jesus as God revealed in him. Then they want to have this deep relationship and love for Jesus, so that no matter what, they'll be able to follow him.

Well, in our own lives, of course, we too, and sometimes more desperately than other times, need this gift of faith. As we gather together today, this is what we really must be praying for as we celebrate this Eucharist. "Lord, increase our faith. Deepen our relationship with you so that we can follow you," because at times God asks very difficult things.

Maybe most of us are aware of this past week, I listened to the account of it on the radio Thursday night, I think it was. There was a funeral at the high school in Waterford. Two of a family's teenage sons were killed in an automobile accident last weekend -- a senior and a freshman in high school. They buried two teenage sons at the same time.

But then this family also had an older son who had just been wounded terribly in Iraq, and the family also had just experienced the loss of their home, which had been foreclosed and they lost it. "How much can God ask of us," you might say? Yet they packed their high school auditorium with 3,500 people, praying, "Increase our faith. Help us to accept whatever you ask of us so we can follow you, even as you accepted suffering and difficulty in your life."

All of us have various crosses to carry. In my own life, I grew up with an older sister who was very severely brain damaged at birth and never grew emotionally or intellectually beyond a three or four-year-old child. I remember how hard it was because she would have seizures at certain times and kids would make fun of her. You know how that is. It's cruel, but it happens.

There were nine of us in the family, she was the oldest, and somehow my mother and father struggled through all of this, but it took great faith and a relationship with Jesus. All of us have those kinds of experiences and when we do, we need to do like those disciples, say to Jesus, "Increase our faith. Deepen our relationship with you."

I also think it's important to think about our first lesson today from Habakkuk. At a time of terrible suffering and violence in his community, he cries out to God, "How long will I cry for help while you pay no attention to me? I denounce the oppression and you do not save. Why do you make me see injustice? Are you pleased to look on tyranny? All I see is outrage, violence and quarrels."

He was living at a time when where was violence everywhere and he's crying out to God in anguish. Isn't that to some extent the situation of our world? We live in a time, too, of terrible violence -- homicides all the time, millions of unborn children killed every year, terrible war going on. Just this past week in Detroit, a woman's home was fire-bombed. That kind of violence is going on everywhere.

We live almost in a culture of violence. In fact, I found this very astounding: In the paper today, there's an article about this new video game called "Halo 3." In two weeks, over $300 million of these games have been sold and they're games that feature this: "Players of 'Halo 3' control the fate of Master Chief, a tough Marine armed to the teeth, who battles opponents with missiles, lasers, guns that fire spikes, energy blasters and other fantastical weapons." They also play in teams.

Do you know where they're doing this? In churches. Seems to me that you could hardly find a more terrible betrayal of the Gospel message of Jesus, but many churches say, "This is a way we attract our teenagers." [The youth] can't buy this game -- you have to be 17 years old or older. But the churches buy it and [the youth] play it in church.

One of the kids explained the game's allure: "It's just fun blowing people up."

That reminded me of a comment that one of our generals from Iraq made a year or so ago. He was giving a public speech and he said, "You know what? I like children. It's a hoot to kill. I like to kill people." What's happened to us? What kind of a culture of violence have we nurtured in our society that that kind of thing can go on, and that even in churches people would play these games to try to draw the kids in?

But you're betraying the very Gospel message of Jesus. Instead of turning to the violence of "Halo," what we need to do is to turn to Jesus. In whatever way we are asked to follow Jesus, it will always have some difficulty, because Jesus walked a difficult path. He took up a cross and walked to Calvary to be executed. "If you really want to be my disciple, deny your very self and follow me."

That's the kind of disciple we want to be -- one who follows Jesus. So again, today we really need to pray for that faith, that relationship with Jesus that will enable us to follow him. Listen again to what St. Paul says to Timothy, and this is what we need to do: "I invite you to fan into a flame the gift of God you received through the laying on of my hands," his baptism confirmation, that gift of God you received at that moment.

He says, "Stir that into a flame of blazing fire within you." He says, "Then follow the pattern of sound doctrine which you have heard from me concerning faith and love in Jesus, and keep this precious deposit with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives within us."

We must remind ourselves that the spirit of Jesus lives in our hearts and when we stir up that spirit, then it will be deepening our relationship with him and enabling us to follow him as his faithful servants, and enabling us to help to transform our world so it will not be a world of violence, a world of suffering, a world of hatred, but will be a world where the goodness of God and the peace of God will prevail. So I urge all of us today, pray with those disciples, "Jesus, increase our faith."

[Bishop Gumbleton celebrated Mass at St. Alan in Troy, Mich.]

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