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Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Nov. 15, 2007 The Peace Pulpit

Recently I have had the experience of writing to various bishops in the United States to alert them to the fact that I was coming to do a public speech of one kind or another in their diocese. As I have received answers from those bishops, sometimes it was a very welcoming answer, and sometimes the bishop would say, "No, it's better if you do not come into my diocese because you can be controversial. You cause too much controversy."

When I get that kind of a letter, I sort of smile to myself and agree not to go, but then I wonder, how can someone be a follower of Jesus and not cause controversy? It seems inevitable, doesn't it, if you really take the gospel seriously? Look at what has happened to Jesus. Remember last Sunday's gospel? Jesus caused controversy. He went into the city of Jericho and there was this sinner, the public sinner, Zacchaeus, a tax collector, one who cooperated with the Roman authorities, who was despised.

Jesus says to Zacchaeus, "Look! Come down from that tree. I have to come to your house today," and the people all got upset, angry and groveled and complained, "He's going into the house of a sinner!" Imagine. Well, there was a little bit of controversy over Jesus because he was ready to welcome sinners. He didn't push them away. No one was excluded from the presence of Jesus and time after time, it caused controversy.

Even just before we hear the passage of tonight, Jesus is in controversy with the Sadducees. These are people who were mostly priests. They represented the institutional life of the chosen people, those who organized and oversaw the works of the temple. They were the priests and Jesus is in controversy with them tonight. But just before that, last week as I mentioned, Zacchaeus, but then also, the Pharisees had come to Jesus. These were teachers of the Law and they were finding fault with Jesus.

They complained because Jesus was reaching out again to sinners, and he wasn't being faithful, as they thought, to the whole of the Law. If you go back to the beginning of the public life of Jesus, the first time he goes home to Nazareth - he's been away in the desert, fasting and doing penance, listening to God's word - where you would think people would welcome him and he preached in the synagogue.

Well, he caused quite a bit of controversy because a very short time later, they were dragging him to the brow of the hill on which that town sat and they were going to throw him over and kill him! Imagine. Now, this was the son of God and yet he's in our midst and he causes controversy. In fact, you may remember the gospel from earlier, in the summer, when Jesus was on his journey to Jerusalem and he said, "I came not to bring peace, but to bring division, and there's nothing I want more than to cast fire upon the earth."

He wanted things to get roused up. He was, in that sense, kind of an incendiary. "I want to cast fire to purify

where there's evil and wrong." Isn't it true, if any of us try at times really to live according to the way of Jesus, we might well become controversial. Now, no one, I'm sure, wants to be in the midst of controversy. I think if you wanted to be controversial, it would be self seeking on your part. It's not comfortable to be in the midst of controversy, to be confronted, to be rejected even.

Yet Jesus shows us that when you proclaim the truth as he did, and when you try to get people to radically change their lives as he did, it will become controversial. A couple weeks ago, and I'm sure all of us here tonight are aware, Pope Benedict had proclaimed that Franz Jägerstätter, a peasant from Austria, should be beatified. So two weeks ago, at the cathedral in the city of Linz - Linz was the diocese where Franz had lived - there was a beautiful ceremony in which thousands of people gathered to proclaim this new, blessed saint:

One who is held up now as our model, one who we must try to follow because he followed Jesus. Franz Jägerstätter definitely was controversial. He lived in a tiny village in Austria called St. Radegund and during World War II (and most of you know this but I repeat it for emphasis) he stood up for what was true. We, the whole church now, recognize that he was saying the truth, but he was rejected by the people in his own village. Even his parish priest told him: "No, you can't do what you're planning to do," because Franz was saying no to Hitler. He was saying no to service in the army, he was saying no to war. He was saying, "You can't kill in the name of Jesus."

He was very controversial. Of course, the Nazi regime would not accept that, so he was taken to prison, first of all in Linz and then to Berlin. On Aug. 9, 1943, he was beheaded, became a martyr for the truth, for the truth of Jesus that we must reject violence and war.

So we must recognize that if we do try to say the truth, live the truth, follow Jesus faithfully, we may be rejected. Probably most of us are not going to be asked to live the way of Jesus to the point of being executed, but sometimes that might even be harder. I know how important it is for us to look up to Franz Jägerstätter as a model, one who was willing to give his very life in order to be faithful to Jesus.

But I think also of his widow, Franziska, 94 years old now, and her three children, their spouses and their families with children and grandchildren, but Franziska especially, who was there at the beatification. For over 60 years, she lived the way of Jesus and the first part of that time when the war was still going on after Franz had been executed, she experienced the hostility, the hatred, the contempt of those people who in that village had rejected Franz. They did not think he was doing the right thing.

As I said, the very priesthood, the bishop, did not - tried to get him to change, to go somehow into that army, for the sake of his children, they told him. They hated him because of that, but the all of that hatred was poured forth upon Franziska over many years until finally it began to change, and now she could be present at the beatification with thousands of people saying, "Yes, you did the right thing. You experienced that rejection, suffering and hostility and you have been through all of that because you are faithful to Jesus."

Doesn't that tell us something about what we have to do in our world today? We live in a culture that has rightly been called a "culture of violence." We're aware of the violence of abortion in our nation, innocent human life destroyed every day within our country. That's a way of violence, not the way of Jesus. But even more, the

violence of executions. We're one of the few countries in the world that still has a death penalty - something brutal, inhuman, dehumanizing.

Perhaps even more, the culture for the violence of war - how quick we are to go to war - and yet everything that Jesus speaks to us through the gospel would be a rejection of violence and war. One scripture scholar tells us if Jesus did not reject violence for any reason whatsoever, we know nothing about Jesus. In other words, it's so clear when you look at this gospel, when you read his words, when you look at how he acted, rejecting violence. If you can't say that about Jesus, you may as well say you can't know anything about Jesus. He rejected violence for any reason.

In fact, our church teaches us this very powerfully also, at least through Pope John Paul. In an encyclical letter he wrote in 1991, a couple weeks after the first Persian Gulf war, that violent part of the fighting ended not the war of the sanctions, but the fighting in that first Persian Gulf war, Pope John Paul wrote an encyclical letter, an authoritative teaching document for the whole church, in which he said, "I, myself, on the occasion of the recent tragic war in the Persian Gulf 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 finally, leaves behind a trail of hatred and resentment that make it all the more difficult to solve the very problems that provoked the war.

How could it be more clear in that Catholic teaching? So why are we afraid to say no to this current war? Why are we afraid to ask our troops to stop the fighting, to come home, to follow the way of Jesus? Is it because we're afraid of being controversial? Is it because we're afraid of being rejected by our fellow citizens? I don't know, but whatever it is, I think we have to try to get the courage to be faithful to the way of Jesus - reject violence, reject war.

Of course, it will be controversial. Many people will say, "No, you have to go to war. It's the only way you can defend your country." Not true. We have to commit ourselves to the way of Jesus, that we transform hatred and violence through love. The way of Jesus is the way of love, and there is no other way to peace in our world. I hope that as we reflect on what those martyrs in the family of the Maccabees did, when they rejected the commands of those around them who said, "You must follow our way or be killed," that we might summon up courage to be like that or be like Franz Jägerstätter.

If we wonder how we could ever have such courage, I suggest that we listen very carefully to the message of this evening's gospel, because in that gospel, Jesus is affirming and strengthening what was just beginning to be an accepted truth at the time of the Maccabees family, that there is a resurrection, there is life after death, that God does welcome us into the fullness of life in the reign of God in heaven. That's what Jesus was teaching to those Sadducees who were making a mockery of the resurrection by offering this absurd story about the seven brothers, each of whom took the same wife. Who is going to be the husband of that wife in heaven? Jesus first of all tells them, "Look! Heaven is different, it's radically different. We don't marry in heaven. It's a totally new life, living within the fullness of God's life."

Jesus also reminded them (and this is where we can get our hope for the resurrection, more than anywhere else), of what they too could have read in the book of Deuteronomy, that God is a God only of the living. God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had died hundreds of years before, but God says to Moses, "I am a God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob. I am the God of the living." Those people who had died hundreds of years before were living in God. Jesus is urging us to become aware of that truth. This is how we base our hope for the resurrection, not because we can prove an afterlife through near-death experiences or because we know our soul is a spiritual being and not a material being, it can't be corrupted, but because of a relationship with God.

If we are related to this God who is a God of the living and we maintain that relationship, then we can be confident that God will welcome us into the fullness of God's life, no matter what happens to us in this world. So it's based on that hope of a resurrection, of living in relationship with God now, and then in the fullness of life in heaven. If we have that confidence, perhaps we can have the courage of the Maccabees brothers, of Franz and Franziska Jägerstätter, of all those witnesses to whom we prayed before our liturgy of the word.

We will have the same courage and we will be willing to be even controversial as we try to live out the word of God and follow the way of Jesus. Perhaps we can make our own, this prayer that St. Paul proclaimed for his brothers and sisters in Thessalonica, "May Jesus, who has loved us, may God, our Father and Mother, who in mercy gives us everlasting comfort and true hope, strengthen us. May God encourage our hearts and make us steadfast in every good work and every word of God."

*[**Editor's Note:** On Nov. 11, 2007, Bishop Gumbleton preached at the Peace Mass held at Trinity College in Washington, D.C., which was sponsored by Pax Christi, The Dorothy Day Catholic Worker House, and other peace groups.]*

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