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Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross

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The Peace Pulpit

The passage we hear today from John's Gospel is part of a conversation Jesus was having with one of the leading Pharisees, Nicodemus. Many of the Pharisees, you'll remember, were opposed to Jesus, but Nicodemus came in the middle of the night because he had begun to be attracted to Jesus, so Jesus engages in this conversation.

At this point, Jesus says to Nicodemus: "No one has gone up to heaven except the one who came from heaven, the Son of Man, who is in heaven. And the Son of Man must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert so that everyone who believes in him may have everlasting life in him. Yes, God so loved the world that God gave God's only son so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost, but may have eternal life. For God sent the son into the world, not to condemn the world, but so that through him, the world might be saved."

It's very important for us to listen very carefully to the lessons today if we are to truly understand the feast that we celebrate -- the Feast of the Holy Cross.

Now when we speak of the holy cross, I'm sure most of us immediately think of a cross like we have here so prominently behind our altar, the body of Jesus crucified, dead, on that cross. But an image like that did not appear in the church at all for over five centuries. It was 500 years before Christians even began to depict Jesus hanging, crucified, tortured and finally dead, on a cross.

You see, in the beginning, the cross was such a horrific, terrible, evil, brutal way to die, that only the worst of criminals, traitors perhaps, or the most violent criminal would ever be put to death on a cross,

executed in that way.

So the early Christians had a horror of the cross. People were executed that way because it was so brutal that authorities figured it would deter other people from committing the same kind of crimes.

In the early centuries, the first Christians never showed a cross like this. They had the form of a cross, but they decorated it with jewels and made it glorious, because for them, the important thing was that Jesus brought life through his death. They celebrated that life, not the horror of the cross.

In fact, you get a sense of this if you call to mind what St. Paul wrote when he was writing to the church in Corinth. In his first letter to that church, in the beginning part of it, he cries out, "Here am I preaching a crucified Christ," like it's the most terrible thing, and Paul says, "To the Jews, it's a scandal," a scandal that you say the son of God was hanged on a cross; that couldn't be, so the Jews rejected it. It's a scandal, a stumbling block.

To the Greeks, the so-called wise people, it was just plain foolishness. Paul says, "Here am I preaching a crucified Christ. It's absurd, but that's what I have to do." Paul says he has to do this because ultimately, as he says in that same passage, "the weakness of God is stronger than human strength and the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom." There's a wisdom and a strength in this crucified Christ that we come to know only when we listen deeply to God's word.

We get a sense of this when we hear what Jesus says to Nicodemus, "The Son of Man must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert." That first lesson today, as I explained before we heard that lesson, and it is even in the lesson, where the Jewish people were being unfaithful to God's covenant with them and their sinfulness brought about the evil of these serpents attacking them and killing them. When Moses prayed and pleaded with God for the people, think about what God tells Moses to do.

"Take the very instrument of evil, that serpent, make it into a bronze serpent, an image of a serpent, and put it up on the pole and when people look at that serpent, they will be healed."

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So what God has done is taken an instrument of evil, an instrument that brings death, transformed it so that it gives life, brings goodness and healing, and that's what we hear Jesus saying about himself, "When I am lifted up, as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, then I will give life."

The instrument of death, the cross, becomes an instrument of healing, of life.

Later on in John's Gospel, we come to the part in the 12th chapter where Jesus is instructing people who think of him as a messiah, but one who will have power and who will dominate. Jesus says, "No. When I am lifted up," and here too he means on the cross, "totally weak, powerless, I will draw all people to myself." Why? Because this instrument of hatred, cruelty and brutality has been made an instrument by which love is poured forth.

That's what Jesus does on the cross. He transforms something that is hate filled and evil into a power for good.

There is a small booklet which a friend of mine published, a Benedictine Sister from Erie, Pennsylvania, in which she described what she calls miracles. She has 21 of these miracles in this small booklet. Here's one of them: "What attracted me to non-violence was watching the evening news in the early '60s and

seeing the blacks and whites sit at segregated lunch counters, refusing to move until they were served, while angry whites poured ketchup on their heads, smeared mustard through their hair, pelted them with hateful slurs. I wondered how people could absorb such hatred and violence without striking back? Then I read an account in *The Catholic Worker* newspaper, where a black man was quoted as saying, "I will let them kick me and kick me until they have kicked all the hatred out of themselves and into my body, where I will transform it into love." ?

She says, "Is this not a miracle?"

That's the miracle of the cross.

You see, Jesus absorbed all the hatred, all the violence, all the evil that could be poured forth upon him. There was no worse execution than being executed on a cross. It was an instrument of hate, but Jesus responded only with love, the way of love. "I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself." That's the way of Jesus.

That's the way that brings us fullness of life, and that's the way we must try to live in the world now, absorbing hatred and evil, placing it within ourselves and never responding to evil with evil, never responding to hatred with hatred, but always responding to evil with good; responding to hatred with love.

The way of Jesus, the way of anyone who follows Jesus. It's the way in which we must try to live in this world.

It's the way we must do that as individuals in our everyday life, in our interactions with one another, in our families, our workplaces, our neighborhoods -- everywhere -- respond to evil with good, to hatred with love.

That's the way we need to respond as a nation in the world. We can't keep on going to war time after time after time, or there will be the war that will end everything, because hatred only begets more hatred, or as John Paul put it, every time you go to war, you always leave behind a trail of hatred and resentment that makes it all the more difficult to resolve the problems that provoked the war.

The only answer is the way of love, the way of Jesus.

And that's what we learn from today's feast. When we exalt the cross, we're not exalting that instrument of hatred, violence and death; we're exalting how Jesus transformed that instrument into an instrument of love, goodness and life, and that's the way of the cross we must try to follow.

[Bishop Gumbleton preached this homily at Stella Maris Parish in Egg Harbor, Wis.]

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