

To follow me, serve others

Thomas Gumbleton | Dec. 3, 2009 The Peace Pulpit

I'm sure when I ask you that question about whether you wish to be confirmed or not, it seems very strange because as Father Schaffer made so clear, you've had a good program of preparation and followed it, participated in it, and you're all here this morning. So it might seem strange to you, but it's important that I ask that question and here's why: Think about it -- when you are being confirmed and you answer that question yes, what are you saying yes to? Is it to a ceremony that will be over in 40 minutes or so, then we all leave the church and that's it?

No. When you say, "Yes, I want to be confirmed," you're saying yes to Jesus. You're saying yes to Jesus Christ, the son of God. You're saying, "Yes, I want to follow Jesus. I want to be a disciple of Jesus, and not just for now, not just for today, but for the rest of my life. I will follow Jesus Christ, be a disciple of Jesus."

And that's not something that any of us should just do casually; we really need to be thoughtful about what we're doing. When I say, "I will follow Jesus," that means I'm going to live according to his values, according to his teachings, the way that he lives, his actions, his words -- I'm going to try to make those the way that I live my life.

Daniel 7:13-14

So we really need to think about what it means to follow Jesus, the choice that you're making now for the rest of your life. If we listen carefully to today's readings, we get a really good sense of what it means to follow Jesus.

Revelation 1:5-8

First of all, in that first reading, the prophet Daniel speaks about "one like a son of man coming in the clouds of heaven." Now Daniel the prophet was speaking those words at a time when God's people were under severe oppression. They had been conquered by another nation, and they were being persecuted. They were ready to give up, so God sends them this encouraging word from the prophet who is in their midst, reminding them that God is always with them and the one like a son of man -- we think of as Jesus -- who now is always with us.

John 18:33b-37

So the first thing that we can really think about, and give thanks for when we receive the sacrament of confirmation, it's a promise on the part of God that Jesus will always be present in your life, always ready to be there when you need help, when you need support, when you need encouragement, when you need to come through some difficult time of suffering or pain; Jesus will be there, because Jesus lives in your spirit through this sacrament in a very special way.

But there's also the challenge that following Jesus presents, and we get a special sense of that from the gospel lesson. Jesus is on trial before the representative of the Roman Empire, the most powerful empire in the world, and this person has the power to condemn Jesus to death. He's questioning Jesus about whether Jesus is a threat to the emperor, because he is to be a king, and the people want to make him a king. So Pilate asks him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus actually rejects that title. He says, "Are you saying this of yourself or have others told you?"

Then when Pilate says that he is saying it, Jesus says, "Well, you have said it, not I, so you're saying I'm a king." But Jesus rejects that title from Pilate or from anyone. As a king according to the way that we usually

think of kings -- someone with power, someone who has an army, someone who can conquer the world. That's the kind of king that Pilate would be thinking of, and that's usually what we think of as kings. In fact, in the Jewish tradition, there was their great leader in the past, David, who was a warrior king, and some people were trying to make Jesus into that.

They wanted Jesus to overthrow the Roman army who was occupying their land, but Jesus said (and these are very important words), "My kingdom does not come from this world." It's not based on the values of the world, and when people had tried to make Jesus a king he said no. He would not allow them, because they thought of king as a powerful ruler with armies and ready to go to war, to use violence, to conquer, to dominate.

This was the last week of Jesus' life, but a few weeks before that, Jesus had given a very important lesson to his disciples, when they were arguing about who's going to be the greatest when he comes into his glory? Who's going to be at his right hand and his left hand? Do you know that Jesus told those disciples? He got them all together and said, "Look, among the pagans, those who don't believe in God, really, those in positions of authority lord it over others, they dominate, they force their will. Among you it cannot be that way. Among you, the one who is to be the leader must be the servant of all."

You have to be the servant, you have to be ready to serve. Jesus says even in today's gospel, "I came not to be served, but to serve, to give my life as a ransom for many." Jesus came to serve and he dramatized that just a few days later at the Last Supper. Do you remember the scene where they're gathered together to celebrate the Passover meal for the last time -- the disciples, his whole community and Jesus? Do you remember what he does right at the beginning?

He takes off his outer garment, puts on a towel around his waist and he gets down in front of every disciple and washes the disciples' feet. Only a slave would do that. Jesus was showing us he really meant, "if you want to follow me, you have to be ready to serve others," total service, even the giving of your life. So that means when you follow Jesus, and this is very challenging to us, you must give up violence, killing. You must say no to war. We find this hard, but it's the way Jesus taught us.

Just a few years ago, a few months actually before Pope John Paul II died, the last trip of his life, he went to Spain. This was in May 2003. The second Persian Gulf war had just started, a war that John Paul was trying very hard to convince the leaders of both countries not to go to war. So when he was in Spain, the reporter writing this article about him said, "Still filled with palpable sadness over the war in Iraq, Pope John Paul told an audience of thousands of Spaniards here today that what he desperately wanted for the world was peace, repeating the word so often that it became a mantra.

He kept saying, "The world needs peace, we must have peace, we must end war, there has to be peace." See he kept repeating those words and then, even more dramatically, the next day, he always ended those trips with tens of thousands of young people they flocked to hear him. Here's what he told them in Spain:

"Beloved young people, you well know how concerned I am about peace in the world," and his whole life expressed that concern for peace in the world. So when he was speaking to them, he denounced what he called "a spiral of violence, terrorism and war." He begged them, these young people, people like yourselves, "be artisans of peace," be builders of peace.

And here's how, these are his words: "Respond to violence and inhuman hatred with the fascinating power of love." That's the only power Jesus wants us to use, "the fascinating power of love." That's how we'll transform the world. That's how the reign of God will become fully present in our midst, when we begin to live and always to follow, in whatever we do, these words of Jesus, "respond to violence with the fascinating power of love."

I'll tell you a beautiful example of this, because I think a lot of times we're pretty skeptical that the fascinating power of love can really change anything.

Shortly after 9/11 happened in the year 2001, within a few months, we went to war with Afghanistan. In that war of course, we were bombing and many people were being killed, civilians. And some of the families of the victims of 9/11, led by a person whom I came to know, her name is Colleen Kelly, formed a group that they called "Families for Peaceful Tomorrows." These are all families who had lost a family member on 9/11. Colleen had lost her brother.

Yet they did not want to use violence and killing in response, so they organized a trip to Afghanistan. I was invited to be part of it and I went with them. What they did was to seek out families in Afghanistan who had a family member killed by U.S. bombs or artillery fire, and they visited them. They shared their grief together, they prayed with them and they brought about reconciliation and a real bond of love.

That's what Jesus is calling us to do -- respond to violence with the fascinating power of love. That's what will bring reconciliation. That's what could bring peace into our world and it's the only thing, and it is the way of Jesus. He rejected violence.

So for most of us, this is maybe even something new that we hadn't thought about much before about Jesus, but when he told Pilate, "My kingdom is not from this world," he meant it doesn't follow the ways of this world, "I have different values, a different way." When you say you're going to follow Jesus, you're saying, "I'm going to try to live according to his values," and that must begin with each of us.

Not many of us would do that kind of dramatic thing that Colleen Kelly and her friends did, going to a place like Afghanistan. We wouldn't have the opportunity or probably the means even, in a way, but right within our own homes, within our neighborhoods, in our country, in our nation with other nations, but starting with me as an individual, I must always try, as Jesus tells us, to respond to hatred with love, to return good for evil, to love not just those who love me, but to love even my enemies. That's the way of Jesus.

This morning then, as we celebrate the sacrament of confirmation, these young people are making a very, very important commitment in their lives. Most of us here I presume have already been confirmed, so maybe it's a really good moment that we can renew our own commitment to follow Jesus, to live according to the way of Jesus, and as we do that, as our whole church community here and throughout the world begins to more faithfully follow the way of Jesus, we will be joining with Jesus in transforming our world into the reign of God where everyone will have a full human life, where there will be peace.

That's our calling, and I pray today that through this sacrament of confirmation, these young people will accept that calling and be strengthened by the holy spirit to follow it, but that all of us will renew our own commitment to follow Jesus and to live according to his way and his values for the rest of our lives.

[This homily was delivered at St. Timothy Parish in Trenton, Mi.]

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