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The opportunities of a small parish

Thomas Gumbleton | May. 7, 2010 The Peace Pulpit

As I announced before we began our celebration this morning, we will welcome two new members into our parish family. We'll be celebrating the sacrament of baptism, so it's a good moment, I think, not only for them to review what it means to become a disciple of Jesus, baptized into his life, but it's an important time for every one of us to reflect on what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, because that is what happens when we are baptized or make our profession of faith. We commit ourselves to follow Jesus Christ, to be one of his disciples, the community of disciples, which he formed and left to carry on his work after he was gone.

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Acts 14:21-27

Psalm 145:8-9, 10-11, 12-13

Revelation 21:1-5a

John 13:31-33a, 34-35

Full text of the readings [1]

And I think the lessons today are very helpful in guiding us on what it means, and perhaps we'll find encouragement today in these lessons at a time when many people in our church, as we all know, seem to be very discouraged, upset at what is happening within the Catholic church. Perhaps you know, it's sort of startling, the second largest Christian denomination in the United States are former Catholics -- people who have given up on our church -- 10 percent of our population, 30 million people are former Catholics. They've given up. Joyfully we welcome two new members today, but I hope it's also a moment when all of us will renew our own enthusiasm and commitment in being a member of the church, and our first lesson today perhaps will help us to realize how we can strengthen our commitment and rejoice in the fact that we are disciples of Jesus.

In that first lesson from the Acts of the Apostles, we may overlook this but I think it's so important: Where was the faith life? Where did it come from, that prompted Paul and Barnabas to go off on this long journey by foot through most of what we now call Asia Minor, Turkey and Syria and that part of the near Middle East? It was their closeness within that community in Antioch. They were members of a small community and it was there that they got the strength of their faith, from their brothers and sisters who were bonded together through baptism, through commitment to Jesus. So Paul and Barnabas were sent out by that community. They made their journey, they came back, to be strengthened once more by sharing the faith life of those who were close to them.

I think one of our problems in the church is we have let our church communities become way too large so we don't really know each other. We're not bonded in that deep sense of faith. Certainly here at St. Leo's you have that opportunity as a smaller parish, to really know one another, to love one another, to be strengthened by the faith of one another, and this is where you get your nourishment as a member of the church. And if we really build up that bond of union among ourselves, that love for one another, we will not be overcome by discouragement at all that is happening within our church, some of which is, we know, very troubling and very discouraging, but we are nourished and strengthened here in this parish family. That's how Paul and Barnabas strengthened their faith and that's how we can strengthen ours.

As I mentioned in introducing that first lesson, it's important to notice, how did those first communities provide for leadership in their communities? They didn't wait for someone from Rome. There was no church in Rome at the time (or just the beginnings of a church in Rome) to appoints their leaders; they gathered together in prayer

and fasting and then the spirit of God surfaced among them and leaders were designated to be the leaders of the community. We need to do more of that in our church -- not wait for appointments to come from Rome, but to find immediately, within our own community, the leaders that can strengthen us, guide us, lead us. That's how every small community, like St. Leo's or any small parish, any community of disciples of Jesus, will continue to flourish and to grow. There's no distinction as to whether they're male or female. The leaders of those early communities were both, and we need to restore that in our own communities, make sure that we surface the leadership that will enable us to grow and to become an ever stronger community of disciples.

But then there's also the challenge of being a disciple of Jesus. When we first hear it, we might not think of it as so much of a challenge. What does Jesus say to us? Remember, these are his final words. It's as though someone very close to us, on his or her deathbed, were telling us what they hoped would happen after they're gone. Jesus says, "My one command to my community: Love one another." Love one another.

There are two very important aspects of what Jesus asks for when he says to love one another, and this is what makes it challenging. First of all, for Jesus, his love for us and what he wants us to imitate, is a love that is totally inclusive.

Remember one of the most important or memorable of all the parables that Jesus tells? We call it the parable of the Good Samaritan. That was a story where Jesus was trying to show us that love has no boundaries -- not on the basis of religion, Samaritan and Jew. They hated each other, and yet Jesus tells this beautiful parable about the Samaritan who reaches across that boundary and loves the Jew who has fallen among robbers. There are no boundaries for Jesus. When we love one another, we must not have any boundaries. That means in our everyday life, in our relationships whether we are at work or in our homes or neighborhoods and communities. But isn't it important also to think of this on a larger basis?

What's one of the most troubling issues that's happening in our country right now? Yesterday, you may have seen on the news, there were tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of people demonstrating across our country against unjust laws that discriminate against people because of their status. We call them "illegals." We don't even think of them as persons, but they are persons. They are people who have been driven from their home, not because they want to find a soft life in the United States. No, it will be a hard life if they make it here. It will be a dangerous life, but they're so desperate, and that desperation comes partly from policies that we have developed in our relationship with a country like Mexico or the countries of Central America, through the free trade agreements. We destroy their economies. They're forced to leave their country merely to save the lives of their children who are starving. No, we want to push them back. How wrong. Through Jesus, when he says love one another, he would refuse to have a barrier built as we're building on our border. That would be totally evil in the eyes of Jesus. You welcome your brother or sister who is in need. Welcome that brother and sister. Make room for them, share with them, love them. This is what Jesus means when he says, "My one command is love one another."

The second part of that that is to challenging, it's referenced when Jesus says in the gospel, "Now is the Son of Man glorified. God is glorified in him. God will glorify him, and he will glorify him very soon." Those words Jesus uses are a reference to what he calls his glorification, his torture, being tortured, being executed, being murdered, and then going through death to new life. That's how Jesus is glorified. So he's talking about being raised on the cross, and what does he teach us there about loving one another? It must include loving your enemies, doing good to those who hurt you, returning good for evil. "I, when I am lifted up," Jesus says, "will draw all people to myself." When I am lifted up on the cross, helpless, tortured, murdered, I will continue to love even those putting me to death.

So when Jesus says, "Love one another as I have loved you," it's a very serious challenge. Probably most of us are not able to carry out this command in its fullness, but we must begin. We must begin to reach out in love to

others. I know this parish family does it because you feed hundreds of people here every day with a hot meal, you have a dental clinic, a medical clinic for people. You respect the dignity of the poorest among us, but that has to keep on going. Today is Haiti Sunday, so you are reaching out to the people of Haiti, but we must continue to reach out to all our brothers and sisters in every way. We must continue to work against the violence of war where we kill our brothers and sisters. We must love one another without boundaries, without limits, without conditions. That's the command that Jesus gives to us, and that's the commitment we make to follow if we are going to be truly disciples of Jesus.

Listen once more now to what could happen if we all began to live according to the way of Jesus. The seer John tells us:

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The first heaven and the first earth has passed away. I saw the New Jerusalem, the Holy City, coming down from God out of heaven, adorned as a bride prepared for her husband. And a loud voice came from the throne, 'Here is the dwelling of God among humans. God will pitch God's tent among them and they will be God's people. God will be with them and wipe every tear from their eyes. There shall be no more death or mourning, crying out or pain, for the world that was has passed away."

That's the vision and that can happen when we all begin to follow Jesus faithfully.

[This homily was preached at St. Leo Parish, Detroit, Mich.]

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