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"Who do people say I am?"

Thomas Gumbleton | Jul. 1, 2010 The Peace Pulpit

I hope we recall last Sunday?s gospel because it was a very important turning point in the life of Jesus. Remember where Jesus had asked the disciples, ?Who do people say I am?? and they said Elijah or one of the prophets, John the Baptist, and he said, ?But who do you say I am?? Then Peter spoke up for all of them and said, ?You are the Christ, the son of the living God,? and it was then that Jesus, as we heard in today?s gospel, set his face toward Jerusalem where he knew he would be handed over to his enemies, tortured, murdered, and then rise from the dead. As he set out then for Jerusalem, he told all of them who wanted to, ?Follow me.? That?s the invitation that is given to us today -- follow Jesus, be one of his disciples.

If we listen carefully to the readings today, we discover something about what this means to be a disciple of Jesus. First of all, from the first lesson we hear something that is reinforcing what Jesus says at the beginning of Mark?s gospel when he invites people to follow him. He says, ?Be converted, change your lives,? change your lives if you?re going to follow Jesus.? That means something very radical. In that first lesson, Elisha, who is being invited to follow Elijah as prophet, to be the prophet of God, what does he do?

Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

1 Kings 19:16b, 19-21

Psalm 16:1-2, 5, 7-8, 9-10, 11

Galatians 5:1, 13-18

Luke 9:51-62

Full text of the readings [1]

He takes all of his belongings -- his oxen, his cart, everything he has that sustains him -- he slaughters the oxen to make a feast for his family, he burns the cart that was used to do the plowing, he has a feast, he leaves everything behind and follows. That?s exactly what it means to follow Jesus. We have to radically change our way of thinking. St. Paul puts it in one of his letters, ?You have to have a revolution in your mind, in your attitudes, how you look upon things if you?re going to follow Jesus. Everything is different, so we have to begin to look how to make radical changes in our lives.

A second thing about following Jesus as we hear in the gospel is that it?s an urgent call. One of the people who said, ?I?ll follow, but let me first go back and bury my father,? that doesn?t mean that his father had died just now and he had to go back and bury him, no, because in the Jewish tradition at the time (and it still holds true), people are buried almost immediately. Well, he was talking about going back to spend the last years with his father and to take over his inheritance, then maybe he would follow Jesus and Jesus says, ?No, right now, follow me.?

For us the same thing is true. It?s an urgent call -- right now, change our lives, commit ourselves to follow Jesus. Another thing that it means is that we don?t place our security in material things. It goes against our whole culture in this country of accumulating wealth. ?The birds of the air have their nests, the fox have their holes, but he Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.? We don?t put our security in material things or in earthly power if we follow Jesus.

A part of that, where we look for our security, means also not to look for that security in military power, because as we hear in that incident at the beginning of the gospel today, when Jesus and his disciples were going to pass through the area between Galilee and Judea that we call Samaria and there had been long antagonism for centuries between the Samaritans and the Jews, and so it was a provocation to start going through their villages

on the way to Jerusalem and Judea.

The Samaritans reacted and James and John right away wanted to use power and force to destroy them. What does Jesus do? He acts with tolerance and understanding. He rebukes the disciples. See this is an extraordinary example of how Jesus chooses, not violence and power and force, but tolerance and love, to awaken the sense of response and understanding. So to follow Jesus means to reject military power, the use of force, the use of violence.

It doesn?t take a lot of imagination on our parts to see how this applies to the world in which we live if we?re going to be disciples of Jesus. Isn?t a large part of the whole opposition to immigration because people are saying, ?They want what I have, but I won?t let them have it; it?s mine?? A disciple of Jesus doesn?t have that attitude. Everything I have is a gift, everything I have must be shared. I don?t place my security in material things.

Just this past week, once more, our president says, ?It?s a matter of national security so now we?re going to send 30,000 troops into Afghanistan to try to continue a war that?s been going on for nine years and clearly has no hope of changing things for the better for the people of Afghanistan. Why do we keep putting our security in power and violence, military force, instead of trying to follow the way of Jesus, the way of non-violence, of act of love?

It takes a lot to really change our minds and our hearts to become disciples of Jesus, and perhaps the most important thing is what we hear in the letter of St. Paul to the Galatians, where he was telling them not to be bound up by the Law, the 613 laws in the Torah. He said, ?That?s not how you are saved. You are saved only through the love of Jesus, so you?re free from that law,? you?re free from being bound up by rules and regulations that don?t really bring about fullness of life for yourself, for anyone, but ?you?re free,? Paul says, ?to love, because there?s nothing more important than to love one another as I have loved you.?

So to be a disciple of Jesus means we have this freedom now, a freedom from laws and strictures that might bind us up, but a freedom to love and to follow the one law that encompasses everything -- ?love one another as I have loved you.? So I hope today, as we reflect on these scriptures and this call to discipleship, that each of us will look deeply into my heart, look into my heart, each of us. Am are ready to follow Jesus. Do I recognize the urgency of that call? Am I ready to let go of everything, radically change my life and become his disciple? As we celebrate this Eucharist, we pray for that grace to give ourselves over entirely to Jesus, to follow him, be his disciple, until we enter fully into the reign of God which he promises.

[This homily was preached at St. Hilary Parish, Redford, Mich.]

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[1] http://www.usccb.org/nab/readings/062710.shtml