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The higher law, the law of love

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The Peace Pulpit

In the first lesson this morning, from the Book of Exodus, we're told about how the Jewish people, on their long journey through the desert, came to a place where they were without water, and they complained and accused Moses of falsely leading them out of the slavery of Egypt with false promises.

They got very angry and then, as we're told, they said, "Is Yahweh, God, with us or not? Is God with us or not?"

Moses was able to find a way, with God's help, to provide water for the people, and so he settled that quarrel but the question, "Is God with us or not?" is a question that is answered in a very powerful way in our other lessons today.

Third Sunday of Lent
Exodus 17:3-7
Psalm 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9
Romans 5:1-2, 5-8
John 4:5-42 or 4:5-15, 19b-26, 39a, 40-42
Full text of the readings

In the Gospel, when Jesus is carrying on that discussion with the Samaritan woman, she brings up the fact that the Jewish people worshiped at Jerusalem, in the temple there. The Samaritans worshiped on Mount Gerizim. What's the real place to worship?

Jesus said, "No, it's not a place that you need to go to any special place to find God because God is spirit and truth." So you do not have to worship on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. True worshipers will worship God in spirit and truth, for this is the kind of worshiper that God wants.

What John is telling us in this passage is that Jesus lives within us. You don't have to go someplace special to find Jesus, and isn't that put very powerfully in the second lesson today where St. Paul tells us, "Hope does not disappoint us."

In other words, we can always have hope, no matter how dark and dreadful and difficult things seem, because our hope, the basis of it, the Holy Spirit has been given to us, pouring into our hearts the love of God. The very love of God is within our hearts and within our spirit.

God is present within us.

St. Paul also makes that statement that is so powerful, too. "See how much God loves us because while we were still sinners, Jesus died for us."

Few would accept to die for a good person, although for a very good person, perhaps someone would dare to die, but Jesus died for us when we were sinners, and that is the basis of the presence of God and God's love in our hearts and in our spirit.

As we deepen our realization of that, I think it's important for us to then say, "We must listen to this God and Jesus present within our spirits." The Gospel lesson again shows us how Jesus acts, and if we're listening to Jesus and trying to follow Him, we have to begin to act this way also.

First of all, what I think is very significant in that story between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, the first thing I notice is how Jesus is so inclusive.

There was a rule, a law, that said a man and a woman shall not be conversing publically, alone like that. Women don't belong out in the public, especially engaged in conversations with men, and the woman, a Samaritan, was very surprised. "How come you, a Jew, and a man, are here talking to me, a woman?"

To Jesus, that didn't make any difference.

For him, women were equal. They had the full status that man would have in the eyes of Jesus, not in the eyes of the law, but in the eyes of Jesus.

Also, sometimes we seem to say some people aren't worthy to come to Church and receive Communion. This woman had five husbands, and Jesus said, "Your current one is not your husband." Yet, here he is engaging in conversation with her and revealing himself to her as the Messiah, the Christ.

Then she is the one that carries the message of Jesus into the town. She becomes his apostle, the one sent to proclaim the news about Jesus. Shouldn't that tell us something about the role of women in our Church? Why do we exclude them from ministry, ordained ministry? They're equal. That's what Jesus is telling us. He didn't let barriers like that separate Him from any person.

That's something that is very important for us to learn from Jesus, to be inclusive, to draw people together.

Don't bar someone from Communion. If they're a sinner, they need it more than ever because Communion is a healing sacrament for us.

Then Jesus also teaches us that human laws aren't what we need to follow. Sometimes we have to go against those laws, and that's what he was doing in this whole incident. We find it hard, I think, to believe that at times people might break the law in order to obey the higher law of God but tomorrow I will be testifying in court for a group of people who did that very thing.

They went onto a military base and tried to dismantle a nuclear weapon. Now they are charged with trespassing and destroying property. These are human laws, but those weapons are intended to destroy our whole planet because we have the will to use them.

How many times have you heard our president say everything's on the table when we're engaged in a war like we are now. In fact, it's three wars. Everything's on the table. That means if we need to, we will use those weapons, and they're weapons of mass destruction. So when someone tries to stop their use, they're arrested. It's against the law to trespass, especially on federal property, to destroy property.

Sometimes the law of God is more important. Look what Jesus did to property in the temple, the tables of the money changers. They were a source of evil. He knocked them over. "Don't make the House of God a den of thieves." So there are times where we have to go against what is a human law in order to proclaim the message of God.

Did Jesus ever use any weapon, let alone a nuclear weapon? Of course not.

So Jesus teaches us there is a higher law, the law of God, the law of love. We must never destroy anyone.

Violence is completely wrong according to the way of Jesus. Again, it may be hard for us to accept it because we've been so trained to be obedient to the law, but if we listen deeply to Jesus, especially as Jesus lives within my own heart and I hope we keep on remembering that.

The love of God is poured into our hearts by the Spirit who was given to us, and that love of God should lead us always to deeper love for God, first of all, but for all our brothers and sisters without exception. There should be no exclusions, no violence against anyone. That's what we will hear if we listen to the spirit speaking deeply within our own hearts.

So be alert to that love of God and the Spirit that is within us, and try to follow the way of Jesus.

[Bishop Gumbleton gave this homily at St. Hilary Parish in Redford, Mich.]

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