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Pentecost reminds us to be forgiving 'other Christs'

by Thomas Gumbleton
The Peace Pulpit

It's very important that we now take a few moments to reflect on the scripture lessons that we've heard today, and to reflect on those lessons in the context of this great feast of Pentecost that we're celebrating, but also, in a way even more in the context of this sacrament of confirmation that we're celebrating. It's very important for these four young people, but also for the rest of us, because it's important that we remind ourselves that each one of us has been baptized and confirmed in the Holy Spirit of Jesus.

So as we listen to the lessons, we can maybe deepen our understanding of what it means to live as a Spirit-filled person. Maybe when you listen to the lessons today, you noticed that there might seem to be a discrepancy. The first lesson tells us it was 50 days later after the day of the Resurrection that this great event of Pentecost happened. He describes it with lots of details, but in the Gospel lesson, St. John says it was Easter Sunday night when the Spirit was given by Jesus to those first disciples.

Acts 2:1-11

It's really not a big problem, because we need to remember that the Gospel writers aren't writing history. They're not trying to record the time and the date of everything that happened in the life of Jesus. They're trying to help us understand why it happened, what its meaning is for us, what's the deep significance of this event. If we go first of all to Luke's description of Pentecost, we discover that Pentecost was a feast that was of low standing among Jewish people. For over 1,200 years, they had celebrated the feast of Pentecost. Pentecost means "50th."

Ps 104:1, 24, 29-30, 31, 34
1 Corinthians 12:3b, 7, 12, 13 OR Galatians 5:16-25
John 20:19-23 OR John 15:26-27: 16:12-15

Full text of the readings

So it's the 50th day after seven weeks. This was the 50th day after the Jewish people had been freed from slavery in Egypt and had been wandering through the desert. Now they come to Mount Sinai. This is where God appears first of all to Moses in a very powerful way. It's a time when God then instructs Moses on the law that is to be given to the people. They enter into a covenant. "I will be your God. You

will be my people." That's the covenant that God made with the chosen people over 1,200 years before the time of Jesus.

Now, Luke is saying that there is a new coming of God among the people, a new Pentecost. This time, it's not a set of laws that bind the people together, but it's the Spirit poured forth upon them. They are bound together now as the community of disciples of Jesus, each of them filled with the very life of Jesus. That's the very bond that brings them together. Truly, each of them is now another Christ. I remember when I was in the seminary, we were instructed in our spiritual formation, but we had to prepare very carefully to be a priest, because as a priest, we would be another Christ.

That would make us, I guess, very special, more important than the rest of the community, but if you listen to what happens today on that feast of Pentecost, everybody is another Christ. That means, as St. Paul explains in our second lesson today, that we all have those gifts that come with being filled with the Spirit. There is a diversity of gifts, but the Spirit is the same. There is diversity of ministries, but the spirit is the same. There is a diversity of works, but the same God works in all. We really become a community of disciples of Jesus where, as St. Paul goes on to say, "In that community of disciples, there is neither slave nor free, male or female, Jew or Gentile. We are all one in Christ."

That has very great implications for us. It means that the work of the church is not just the work of ordained people. It's the work of the whole community. We're all equal in freedom and dignity. So we all have a right to share in every ministry of the church, wherever God calls us through the Holy Spirit. This is important in understanding of what happened at that first Pentecost and what happens now in our church as we celebrate this sacrament of confirmation, and as we all remind ourselves of our own reception of the Spirit of Jesus at the time of our baptism and confirmation. We are all other Christs, equal in freedom and dignity in this one community of disciples.

Then, when we turn to the Gospel lesson, we find out that this great privilege that we have also brings with it responsibilities. Jesus comes into the midst of those first disciples, and he says to them, "Peace be with you." He breathes on them. We might not get the full significance of that, but it has a very deep meaning. The word that is used -- and it's only used one other time in the whole Bible -- this word of breathing on those disciples, it's the same word that's used in the Book of Genesis, when God has formed the first human creature, and God is described as breathing on that, bringing that human being to life.

Now this is a new creation. That's what John is trying to tell us. Something new and radically different has happened. We're born now with the very Spirit of Jesus within us. So Jesus tells the disciples, "As God sent me, I send you." The same work that Jesus came to do is now our work, to transform our world. The first thing we need to do is what Jesus did there with those first disciples. He breathed on them and gave them the Holy Spirit. Then he forgave them. He came to bring reconciliation. These are disciples that had abandoned him. They had left, run away in fear. They were hiding in fear that Sunday night.

He came into their midst and forgave them. He came to perform reconciliation. That is the first task we have as individuals and as a community, to forgive one another, to make reconciliation happen. That can, of course, be very challenging. It's hard to forgive if we've been hurt deeply, or something terrible has happened to us, perpetrated by another. I ask you to remember what happened here in our own community not very long ago, when that terrible murder took place in Farmington Hills. A young man beat to death his own father, and beat his mother and one of his brothers. Then at the funeral of the father, one of the other children, another brother, gave the eulogy.

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It was extraordinary, what he did. He forgave the brother who killed his father, publicly in the name of the family. He spoke words of forgiveness and love. It seems almost impossible that someone could do that, and yet, it fulfilled the Spirit of Jesus. We understand that's exactly what we need to do in every circumstance: Forgive one another. That's how we'll bring peace into our world. That's the first thing we must do, is to try to reach out in forgiveness and love. Jesus tells us the Spirit gives us the power not only to forgive, but also to restrain evil, to block evil. We must be about that also.

Think of our world again as a world so filled with violence, such as that murder that I just talked about, violence throughout our city, in our world with wars happening. According to our Gospel today, Jesus is telling it's our task to restrain that violence, to restrain evil. We might wonder how. It has to start in our everyday life. If we're going to restrain the evil of war, it has to start in our relationships with one another, where we restrain evil. There's a lot of discussion today about how bullying takes place in our school. Young people like yourselves might think perhaps about how you can restrain some of that violence if it happens in the circumstances of your life.

All of us must at least try to be conscious of how we must restrain and hold back evil, and especially, I think today, the evil of violence. Forgive one another, love one another and restrain the evil that is in our world always. That's the task that we have because we are other Christs, filled with the very Spirit of Jesus. In the letter that St. Paul wrote to the church at Galatia, he said something that perhaps we can let linger in our hearts and minds today, that if we begin to live now as other Christs, we restrain evil. We bring love, forgiveness and reconciliation into our world.

If we really try to be the witness to Jesus that the Spirit enables us to be, then we will begin to experience what St. Paul calls the fruits of the Spirit: joy, peace, patience, understanding, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness. These are the fruits of the Holy Spirit, and they will be ours if we now begin to go out into our world as other Christs, filled the very spirit of Jesus. As God sent Him, God now sends each one of us.

[Homily given at St. Leo Church, Detroit. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. **Sign up here** to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

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