

Pentecost Sunday

Thomas Gumbleton | Jun. 11, 2006 The Peace Pulpit

[Confirmation for six young adults today, so the homily begins directed at them.]

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Perhaps I'll say just a word about why it's important that you say, "Yes, I want to be confirmed!" and that you say it in a very loud and clear, firm voice and with enthusiasm. Because, and I really want you to think about this as we go forward with this sacrament, what are you saying yes to? Is it to a ceremony that will be over in 45 minutes or an hour or so, then we all leave the church and that's it. No! When you say, "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 his disciple. I want to live according to his values. I want Jesus to be the one who guides me in a very special way throughout my whole life. I wish to follow him."

That's a very important decision in your life, a very important "Yes!" No one should just say "yes" to Jesus sort of casually. It's too important, because if you really mean it, it's going to set the direction for your whole life. When you say "yes" to Jesus, you say I will live the way Jesus did, what he taught, and that's not always easy and it takes great determination and real commitment. And again, it's not just for today or a short time. It's for the rest of your life, in fact, forever, when you say "yes" to Jesus.

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Perhaps we should take a couple of minutes to think about what that means when I say, "I'm going to follow the teachings of Jesus, live according to his values." Of course, there are many, many values that Jesus shows us, but in this community I'm sure you're very much aware that we put a lot of emphasis on Jesus as one who is compassionate, loving, healing -- one who rejects violence for any reason whatsoever. These are values

that you don't find so clearly in the world around us. I read just the other day that almost two-thirds of the people of the United States -- and this includes, of course, Catholics and other Christians who say they follow Jesus -- two-thirds of the people of this country would agree that you could torture someone to get information from them. Now if you know the Gospel, can you ever imagine Jesus torturing someone? Of course not! That would be totally contrary to Jesus! But if you follow the ways of the world around us, you fall into that same pattern and say, "Yeah, torture's OK if you need to do it." No, it's not OK, not if you follow Jesus.

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This past couple of weeks there has been a lot in the news about the terrible atrocities that took place in a small town in Iraq called Haditha. U.S. soldiers, Marines they were, executed 24 civilians -- men, elderly men, women, and even tiny children -- shot them in the head, shot them through the chest. It was an atrocity. And some people might say, "Well, that's an exception." But war is an atrocity! You cannot imagine Jesus entering into war ever. So when you say "I'm going to follow Jesus," you're going to stand out if you really mean it and you live according to this way. Your life will be different. You'll choose a way that will make you stand apart from a lot of people around us. And if we do it well, though, and really witness to the way of Jesus, well then we can help in the work of Jesus. As you heard in the Gospel, "As God sent me, I send you." The words of Jesus can transform this world so people *will not* commit those kinds of atrocities. That's what's happening today -- you're accepting this call to follow Jesus and to live according to his way.

There's one place in the Gospel where I think the way of Jesus is dramatized very, very clearly on these two points especially -- how he rejects violence and how he is compassionate, reaching out to heal and to forgive. This happened on Holy Thursday night and you find it clearly described in Luke's Gospel. Remember how the crowd, the mob was coming to Jesus to arrest him and to torture him and to execute him. They come forward and Judas walks up and kisses Jesus and Jesus responds with a word of love for Judas -- friend, he calls him. But then, remember, one of the disciples takes out a sword and begins to fight, to defend Jesus with violence. And Jesus says, "Put away your sword! Anyone who lives by the sword will die by the sword." He rejects violence so clearly, even to defend himself, a totally innocent person. No, he will not allow violence. But instead what does he do? He reaches down and he picks up the severed ear and heals the person who was wounded. That's the way of Jesus -- a way of compassion, forgiveness and love, rejecting all violence.

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That's the way you are choosing to follow and I hope everyone in this church is reminding yourself -- all of us went through this -- that we have committed ourselves to follow Jesus. Not just these young people today but all of us must renew our own commitment; open ourselves to the coming of the Holy Spirit once more so that we can recommit ourselves to follow the way of Jesus. And it will be very difficult, but if we listen to the Scriptures today, we're reminded that God sends the Holy Spirit in a very powerful way, to change us, to enable us to have the strength and the courage and the love and the compassion of Jesus.

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In John's Gospel it is presented in a very simple way. Jesus says, "Peace be with you," and then he breathes on the disciples and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." And it happened right at that moment and they were transformed.

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In Luke's Acts of the Apostles, he spells it out in a more dramatic way and he uses a lot of symbols to help us understand what happens when Jesus breathes upon us and gives us the Holy Spirit. Luke says there's a driving wind, the whole house is shaking and those disciples who read this account of Luke would understand that driving wind because it's the same word used in the Book of Genesis. It's like the driving wind that God sent forth over the unformed chaos and formed the world. That's the Holy Spirit, that powerful Spirit of God that brought the first creation about and now we become a new creation through that power of God's Spirit, the driving wind.

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Luke tells us also about the fire and that reminded those first disciples of the time when God appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai and provided to Moses what we call the Torah, the Law that was the binding law of the covenant between God and the people and at that moment, there was the sign of fire and so now God is telling us through the Holy Spirit, Jesus gives us the new Torah, which, of course, is the law of love. That's the law of Jesus -- the law of love. And so we receive the Holy Spirit just as those Chosen People in the desert at Sinai received the Spirit. Through the fire we receive the Spirit now in the same way. And the Spirit brings us those gifts that Paul speaks about in the letter to the church at Corinth -- all the various gifts: gifts to be teachers and apostles and evangelists and healers. All the gifts that are given to the whole community, we receive those gifts. They're spelled out as you probably learned when you were preparing for the sacrament -- it's the gift of wisdom, understanding, right judgment, courage, knowledge, love and awe of God. Those are the gifts that you receive today and so all of us, through

those gifts and the coming of the Holy Spirit, can be changed so that we can live according to the way of Jesus. It's a very difficult calling but it's possible for every one of us if we open ourselves to the coming of the Holy Spirit as we celebrate this sacrament of Confirmation today.

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The next thing I'll do is to ask everyone, as we proceed with the sacrament, to pray in a very special way, to pray with great fervor, for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon these young men and women of our parish family. But when we do that, pray for all of us. Pray that the Holy Spirit will truly come upon this whole church this morning and fill us with the power of God's love so that when we leave the church, not just our newly confirmed, but all of us will go back out into our everyday lives ready to live according to the way of Jesus, to fulfill Jesus' command -- "As God sent me, so I send you," -- to transform our world, through compassion and love, the way of Jesus. I know that if we pray for this, God's Spirit will come upon us and every one of us will be able to live now more faithfully according to the way of Jesus for the rest of our lives.

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