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Say no to violence to say yes to the way of Jesus

by Thomas Gumbleton
The Peace Pulpit

It's a bit unusual, but today's three lessons all speak exactly about the same thing, and that is about how God calls people to do God's work. In each of the instances, the person being called is at first hesitant. Isaiah says, "I'm not worthy; I'm a sinner," but then God heals his sinfulness and asks him to go, to carry out God's work. Paul says the same thing: "I was the worst; in fact, I persecuted the church of God."

<p>He was one who started out hating what Jesus stood for, but then when Jesus appeared to him and he saw Jesus' love for him, he was ready to follow Jesus, and he did. He became the nations. In the Gospel lesson, we see Peter first standing out from the others, sons of Zebedee who were his partners in fishing -- Jesus calls them. Peter says, "I'm not worthy, I'm a sinner."</p> <p>Jesus says in effect, "I can heal you; follow me." So they did, and in each instance James and John heard the call of Jesus. He was asking them to change their lives dramatically, to listen to what he taught, to watch how he acted, to follow him and be the ones who would begin to spread the Gospel message throughout Jerusalem and Judea and to the ends of the earth. This work of God, of calling people, still goes on.</p>	<p>He was one who started out hating what Jesus stood for, but then when Jesus appeared to him and he saw Jesus' love for him, he was ready to follow Jesus, and he did. He became the nations. In the Gospel lesson, we see Peter first standing out from the others, sons of Zebedee who were his partners in fishing -- Jesus calls them. Peter says, "I'm not worthy, I'm a sinner."</p> <p>Jesus says in effect, "I can heal you; follow me." So they did, and in each instance James and John heard the call of Jesus. He was asking them to change their lives dramatically, to listen to what he taught, to watch how he acted, to follow him and be the ones who would begin to spread the Gospel message throughout Jerusalem and Judea and to the ends of the earth. This work of God, of calling people, still goes on.</p>	<p>appeared to him and he saw Jesus' love for him, he was ready to follow Jesus, and he did. He became the nations. In the Gospel lesson, we see Peter first standing out from the others, sons of Zebedee who were his partners in fishing -- Jesus calls them. Peter says, "I'm not worthy, I'm a sinner."</p> <p>Jesus says in effect, "I can heal you; follow me." So they did, and in each instance James and John heard the call of Jesus. He was asking them to change their lives dramatically, to listen to what he taught, to watch how he acted, to follow him and be the ones who would begin to spread the Gospel message throughout Jerusalem and Judea and to the ends of the earth. This work of God, of calling people, still goes on.</p> <p>Full text of the readings</p>
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Each of us, because we're gathered here, it's clear that each of us has been called by God through Jesus. Our call was confirmed within us at our baptism. You may remember last week, I spoke about how part of our call is to be a prophet. When you're baptized, you're signed with chrism as Jesus was anointed priest, prophet and king, so must you follow Jesus, be prophetic.

Today's three lessons teach us in following Jesus, it really means a dramatic change in our lives so that we can bring the message of Jesus, be prophetic -- proclaim that message in words, but most of all, by the way we live. We then affect the world around us. The message of Jesus becomes a message that can

transform our world, transform each of us, but then transform all of the world -- all of society into the reign of God -- the reign of peace, forgiveness and love.

As we reflect on these Scripture lessons, I hope that we might ask ourselves, Have I ever consciously decided yes, I will follow Jesus, I will allow myself to hear God's word, to listen to Jesus, watch how he acts and truly follow him? Most of us were baptized as infants before we could make such decisions, but at some point in our lives, it's really important to say "yes," as in Isaiah, [when] God says, "Whom will I send?" Isaiah says, "Here I am; send me."

There has to be a point in our life where each one of us really consciously and clearly says, "Here I am, Lord; send me. I want to be converted to your way to proclaim that way by the way I live so that your word, your message can be carried out in our world, and our world be transformed."

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I don't think it takes very much instruction on the part of any of us to realize that our world is not transformed. Our country is not transformed. Probably even in our personal lives, we can't say we've been transformed truly to follow Jesus. In our families, in our parish family, we need to be constantly converted, constantly changed in order to be faithful to the call and say, "Yes, send me." In our country, we're experiencing something that I think is as clear an example of how we're not following Jesus as you can find. Our country is a country where violence seems to be everywhere.

We have a culture of violence, and that should not be in a country where 65 million of us are Catholic, plus all of the others who say they follow Jesus. Why is not our culture different? I'm sure you're all aware of what I'm speaking about. We've been at war since 1991. Our president carries out what they call extrajudicial killings. He has a list of people that he determines: "We'll kill this person, we'll kill that person." And they're in other countries that we're even not at war with. How could we ever justify that?

Even then, the killing that goes on in our society: a few weeks ago those children in Newtown, and just last week a former police officer in Los Angeles who killed three people and has a whole list of people he's determined to kill, so they have to lock down their schools. We're living in a situation where violence is everywhere. Yesterday early in the morning, they discovered a woman on the side of freeway I-75 near Mack Avenue, shot to death in her car.

It's everywhere, this violence. I have a conviction that it's partly because we have not taken the message of Jesus clearly. Scripture scholar John McKenzie, in a book he wrote many years ago, said, "If Jesus did not reject violence for any reason whatsoever, we know nothing about Jesus." What he's saying is that in the Scriptures, it's so clear that Jesus said "no" to violence. The only way we're going to change our world and transform this world into the reign of God is to follow his way, which is a way not of violence but a way of love, the transforming power of love.

In the preface to one of our Eucharistic prayers, we say, "All-powerful and ever-living God, we do well always and everywhere to give you thanks through Jesus Christ, our Lord. In him, you have renewed all things. You've given us all a share in his riches. Though his nature was divine, Jesus rejected his divinity and became one of us in every way. He emptied himself, shedding his blood on the cross, and therefore he was exalted above all creation and became the source of eternal life to all who follow him."

He came to bring eternal life to all who follow him, to bring his peace, justice and love into our world, to transform it into the reign of God if we follow him. I do not think it's possible for any of us in one

decisive moment -- such as Isaiah or Peter, James, John or Paul -- to be able to say "yes" totally to Jesus and to his way. I think it is important if we want to change this culture of violence in our country and in our world that we begin to open ourselves to a conversion, a deep conversion to the way of Jesus, which is the way of nonviolence, a way of transforming love.

When Pope John Paul was in Ireland many years ago at a time when there was terrible violence going on in that country (I'm sure we can remember those days back in the late '60s, '70s and early '80s), and John Paul preached to the Irish people about the nonviolence of Jesus. He declared to them, "Violence is a lie. Violence is not the Christian way. Violence is not the way of the Catholic church. You must say 'no' to violence and only say 'yes' to peace, forgiveness and love, for they are of Christ and only they are of Christ."

If we're going to change our world, bring peace into this world and into our nation, we have to begin to say "no" to violence; recognize that it's a lie, it's not the Christian way. We have to say "no" to violence at every level within our families, within our communities, within our country and within our world.

Again, as John Paul put it, we must say "no" to war, war never again. We have to begin to follow the way of Jesus. As we reflect on these lessons today and we see the example of the ones who heard God's call and followed it completely, I hope we pray that each of us will look deeply into our hearts and try to discover if we have really said "yes" to Jesus and to his way, the way of peace, forgiveness and love.

If we want to say that "yes," we can be confident that just as God healed Isaiah so he could become the prophet he was, and how he healed Peter and said, "Yes, even though you're a sinner, if you follow me I will change that," and how Paul who declared himself the worst of sinners, God changed him. If we open ourselves to this call and try to respond to it, God will help to change our hearts so that we can follow Jesus and bring his peace into our world.

[Homily given at St. Hilary Catholic Church in Redford, Mich. 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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