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Everyone is welcome to be in the community of Christ

Thomas Gumbleton | Apr. 18, 2013 The Peace Pulpit

This Gospel that we hear today is really sort of a surprise because if you remember last Sunday, that scene in the upper room eight days after Jesus had risen from the dead and he came back and showed Thomas his side and his hands and so on -- at the end of all of that, in John?s Gospel, he writes, ?There were many other signs that Jesus gave in the presence of his disciples, but they?re not recorded in this book. These are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Believe, and you will have life through his name.?

Third Sunday of Easter

Acts 5:27-32, 40-41
Psalm 30
Revelation 5:11-14
John 21:1-19

That was the original end of this Gospel of John. It comes to a very decisive conclusion, and we might think, ?Well, everything is settled. The disciples know exactly what to do. Jesus has given them a blueprint for how the church is to be, how it?s to function, and so on,? and yet, just the opposite is true. They don?t know what to do; they?re confused. They go back home to their families and then, on this occasion that we hear in this appendix to John?s Gospel, really gives a good description of the way things were. The disciples struggling to know, ?Well, what does he want us to do? He?s gone now, he says he?ll be with us, but here we are without any guidance at all.? So they?re struggling, confused, trying to understand what it means to be a community of the disciples of Jesus.

Then in the midst of their confusion and so on, they decide to go back to their regular work. Peter, James and John and some of the others had been people who fish for a living, and then we hear this really extraordinary experience that they have of Jesus.

There are many things in this passage now that help us to understand what Jesus intended for his community of disciples, and how he intended them to function.

First of all, it?s clear when we hear this description of the disciples as being people who fish, that would remind them that back when he first called them to be disciples, he told them, ?I will make you fishers of men,? and women, of human beings, ?not just the fish in the sea, but I?m going to ask you to call together people and become my people.?

He had given them a mission. So now, this experience reminds them of that mission.

As we go on in what happens on this occasion, we discover a couple of things about that mission. One is how it has to be totally inclusive. You don?t push anybody out of the community. You draw everybody in, until you have -- in John?s Gospel, he often uses large numbers to make a point by exaggeration. Back when he changed water into wine, when Jesus did that, John said, ?There were six jugs of water with thirty gallons of each,? he?s making a point. Thirty gallons in six jugs, that?s a lot of wine, but they certainly didn?t drink it all on that occasion. John is simply making a point: there?s no limit to what God can do. So this occasion, when they?re fishing, the net is bulging with fish, bulging, but it doesn?t break. See, everybody can come in.

There?s also been a lot of discussion over the years from commentators on the scriptures about, why 153? It seems kind of odd, one number like that: 153. Well, there have been all kinds of explanations, but probably the

best one is what St. Jerome offered. He was one who translated the Bible into Latin and was a great scripture scholar. He said in the Greek sciences about nature, there were 153 species of fish.

So in other words, you draw in everybody. No limits again; not exclusive. This is a community where everybody is welcome and is invited to become a member. That?s the sign that Jesus was giving in this episode that we hear now that?s added to our Gospel of John.

It?s something we need to remember, that we?re not to push people away from the church. We?re supposed to draw them in. We want everyone to be part of this community of the disciples of Jesus.

Everyone is welcome, including sinners, of course. Peter and the other disciples had all fled and abandoned Jesus, betrayed him, denied him, but they?re welcome. At the Eucharistic feast -- that?s obviously when Jesus is breaking bread for the disciples -- that?s the sign of the Eucharist. So they?re gathered there around that fire on the beach, celebrating the Eucharist, and again, nobody is told, ?Stay away.? Everyone is invited: participate.

That?s how you grow into the love of God, by being deeply joined with Jesus in the Eucharist.

Again, I want to emphasize that the disciples were just learning this, how to be the community of disciples, how to be the church. There wasn?t a predetermined plan with institutional guidelines and laws developed and so on. No, none of that. They had to struggle to understand how to be the community of disciples of Jesus.

One of the most important things was leadership. If you go to Matthew?s Gospel, you find what is used as the basis for our hierarchical structure in the church. In the eighteenth chapter of Matthew?s Gospel, you have Jesus saying to Peter, ?Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my church. The gates of hell will not prevail against it. I give to you the keys of the kingdom. Whatever you decide, will be decided. Whatever you loose on earth, will be loosed,? an authoritative power structure.

But here, right at the beginning, it?s altogether different. It?s to be a leadership of love. ?Peter, do you love me?? -- that?s the only thing that?s important -- ?Do you love me?? Jesus says that three times, to the dismay of Peter. He?s trying to say, ?Yes, Lord, you know it. Why do you keep asking? I love you!? when Jesus was really trying to impress on him and the other disciples, and on us, that that?s the only important thing: to love Jesus. ?This is my one command. Love one another as I have loved you.?

That?s how our leadership in the church should work because it?s then Jesus says to Peter, ?Feed my lambs. Feed my sheep. Be the shepherd who nurtures and nourishes and draws out of love.?

That?s the kind of church we need.

That?s the kind of church we have to be working toward becoming part of -- following that leadership of love, not a leadership of power and authority and penances and penalties and exclusions and so on, but a leadership that says love.

Love is the only thing that really counts in this community of disciples of Jesus; love and leadership of the church throughout all the members of the church. The whole community would be a community of disciples who love one another and who proclaim that love to the world around us and who carry out the mission of Jesus by drawing all into this community of disciples.

We establish the church by doing this promulgation of love wherever we go, not just by our words, but by our actions. When we become that kind of a church, from the Pope right through the whole community, then that?s when we?ll be a sign to the world that will draw the world to enter into the reign of God and bring fullness of God?s reign into reality -- a reign of love, a reign that will be peace and justice for all.

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

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