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To heal, we must reach out in love and forgiveness

Thomas Gumbleton | Sep. 15, 2011 The Peace Pulpit

We are all very much aware, of course, that today is the 10th anniversary of the terrible act of terrorism perpetrated against us 10 years ago. Isn't it very challenging to try to hear what God is speaking to us today?

In fact, I think we might be most surprised by the passage from the Book of Sirach because don't we often think of the Old Testament as a testament where God is revealed as being a very harsh God almost, a warrior God. He acts against enemies and allows the Chosen People to do that.

Here, we have a passage where this wise person, speaking for God, says, "Grudge and wrath, these are abominations. Whoever demands revenge will suffer vengeance. Forgive the crimes of your neighbor. Remember your final end and give up hatred. Remember the Commandments and do not bear grudges or demand vengeance from your neighbor."

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Sirach 27:30-28:9
Psalm 103
Romans 14:7-9a
Matthew 18:21-35
Full text of the readings [1]

That's from the Old Testament, and even more powerfully in the New Testament, Jesus who, of course, in previous chapters of this Gospel of Matthew, has taught us so clearly: don't just love those who love you. Love your enemy. Do good to the one who hurt you.

Just last week, as I mentioned before, Jesus had been instructing the disciples in how to settle disputes and the kind of anger that arise up within the community, demanding that they do forgive each other, "And from your heart," Jesus says. "Make sure it's sincere and deep, total forgiveness."

The disciples listened, of course, but as we hear today, Peter, in his very practical way says, "Okay, if we're going to forgive, how many times? Does it have to be without limit?"

Peter thinks he is offering what to him would be an extreme number: seven. "Do I have to forgive seven times?"

In the Jewish tradition, seven was the number of completeness, of fullness, so anything that was seven was about as far as you could go.

Jesus says, "No, not seven times, but seventy times seven times. That is, you must forgive without limit."

As we look within our own hearts today, and we remember what happened back 10 years ago, what were our reactions then?

What are our reactions now within my own heart, we ask, but also as a nation?

In early November of 2001, I received a letter from a young woman who married. She had a husband and three young children.

I was surprised because I did not know her at the time. I've come to know her very well since, but this is early

November, two months after 9/11, and the bishops were meeting as we always do in November of each year.

She wrote to me with the hopes that I could bring what she wrote to the attention of the other bishops.

She said, "I'm writing to you today to offer support and encouragement for what I hope will be a very profound discussion among the bishops. My brother, William Kelly Jr., was killed on September 11 at the World Trade Center.

"There is no scale on which my family can begin to measure our loss, nor are there any words to adequately express our sorrow, but my family is quite clear that we would never want another family, whether Afghan or American, to feel the way that we do now.

"My family runs the spectrum from pacifist to a Marine, but we have tried to listen very carefully and respectfully to one another these past two months. My youngest sister feels that in the face of this horrible evil, the only way to change people is to show them love, not more evil. Is that Christ-like? Yes. Foolish and naïve in human terms? No, I don't think so if you really think it through. Personally, I adamantly oppose the bombings. I have no other argument than that it is not Christ-like.

"I do not know what Jesus would do in these current times, but I am certain that Jesus would not advocate the bombing of anyone. The deepest, truest part of our heart knows this truth.

"You and I, and my family live in the very human world, however, so how can we reach this true place?

"Our stumbling block seems to be the lack of choices given the American public concerning our response to September 11. Our country seems to see no other way because we have been presented with no other way.

"So my urgent request to the Bishops is can you begin the discussion of the other way, Christ's way? Could you help provide moral guidance to a majority that is voicing support for a bombing campaign? Could you open a dialogue of alternatives and concrete ideas leading to the truth of Jesus in our hearts? Would you pray that we all may be open to God's difficult and sometimes divisive message?"

When she wrote that, she told me later, she was feeling very confused and troubled, and yet, she and her family had gone through a very difficult struggle trying to come to peace within themselves, to be reconciled with one another even though they disagreed among themselves.

They did finally come to the conclusion that no one else should feel the experience of the terrible grief and suffering that they had. No other family should be confronted with that.

Isn't that the truth? Wouldn't we all say that what was done to us, how could we now do that to others?

I'm sorry to say that even though I shared this letter with the Bishops back in November of 2001, we really did not carry on any discussion. We did not try to find a way that we can really bring to life within our people and ourselves the message of Jesus.

How can we spread that message within our own country? Even now, 10 years later, I don't think we as the community of disciples of Jesus have really confronted the truth that Jesus proclaims.

The only way to peace is his way, the way of forgiveness, the way of love, the way in which we give up vengeance and refuse to take revenge.

Probably this is the most difficult of all the teachings of Jesus where every one of us is truly challenged as individuals and things that happen to us individually in our lives, but certainly as a nation we are challenged.

Here it is 10 years later.

How many families have we brought to grief in Afghanistan, in Iraq, in Pakistan because of the violence that we've perpetrated for 10 years? Colleen Kelly, the person who wrote that letter, said at the time that she was very confused but she began to think it through.

So together with other families who experienced the same grief she did, families who had lost a family member on 9/11, they joined together in an organization which they called Families for Peaceful Tomorrows.

A couple years later, in fact, Colleen joined with a group who went to Iraq to visit families who had lost a family member through bombings by the United States.

It was a very powerful experience to see people from both sides weep together, and a very healing experience for Colleen and anyone else who was in that delegation.

In a very small way, it brought peace to those families in Iraq, but also to Colleen and the other family members who were with her from other families. They began to feel healing.

I think that is the example for all of us, that we must try to reach out in love and forgiveness if we ever want healing to enter into our own hearts, and certainly if we ever want healing and peace to come into our world.

It will only be because we take the message of Jesus with great seriousness. We listen to it, let it into our hearts and influence all of our actions.

Jesus shows us the way, the only way to peace, and that is through forgiveness and love.

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

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