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The Holy Spirit helps each of us transform the world

Thomas Gumbleton | Apr. 19, 2012 The Peace Pulpit

It's really amazing how appropriate these readings are for what we're celebrating today. The account in the Gospel, as you know, is the first Easter Sunday, the day Jesus rose from the dead. If you remember last Sunday's Gospel, the day of Easter, John is the same Gospel writer who told us how early in the morning, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and was worried about the stone being moved away. It was gone, and she discovered that the tomb was empty. She was terrified.
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She runs and gets Peter and John. They come running to the tomb, and John gets there first. He waits and Peter comes, and then they both go in. The Gospel writer says John saw and believed. It doesn't say anything about Peter, but then they both believed. Now it's Easter Sunday night, when our Gospel for today begins. After Peter and John had left the tomb, Jesus saw Mary Magdalene, but she didn't recognize him. He called her by her name, and then she knew right away who this is.

Second Sunday of Easter
Acts 4:32-35
Psalms 118:2-4, 13-15, 22-24
1 John 5:1-6
John 20:19-31
Full text of the readings [1]

She's the one that went and told all the other disciples. At first, it seems like they're just trying to be confident, happy and rejoice, but now on Easter Sunday night, I guess they're beginning to have kind of second thoughts. Could it really have happened or did somebody steal the body? What's going on? They're afraid, so they gather in that upper room, all the disciples, the community of disciples, out of fear. Then suddenly, as we hear in the Gospel today, Jesus is right there in their midst.

He calms them down. He says, "Peace be with you." They can hardly believe what's happening, but then he says something that is very important. He breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." On Easter Sunday night is when Jesus came and brought forth the Holy Spirit upon the whole church that was gathered there. Before he said, "Receive the Holy Spirit," he breathed on them. That word is very special. There is only one other time in the Hebrew Scriptures when that word is used, and it's at creation when, according to the Book of Genesis, God created Adam.

God breathed on him and he became a human person. Out of clay, the dust of the earth, God has created humankind, God breathing, giving life and spirit. Now, on this Easter Sunday night, God breathes on the church and John uses the same word that was in Genesis, and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit," so they become alive now, a whole new creation. That's what the message is. It's a new creation now. The old is gone. It's all new, a new way of being in relationship with God, with the Holy Spirit alive in their hearts.

Then Jesus says to them, "As God sent Me, so I send you." God sent Jesus into the world to change this world, to transform it into the Reign of God, a Reign of justice, peace, love and joy, but the work wasn't done when Jesus was crucified and then rose from the dead. Jesus now gives the church the work that he came to do. This new creation now has a new task. It's something astounding really, to do what Jesus now says to the disciples, "Whatever sins you forgive, they're forgiven. The evil you restrain, it is restrained."

The first thing Jesus asks of his church is to be a reconciling church, a forgiving church, a church who loves, forgives, reconciles and draws people back, not a church who condemns and drives away. No, it's a loving church, a church that reconciles. So wherever the Christian community goes, where we are now, it's our task to reach out to one another, first of all, always in a spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation and love. That means in our homes, our neighborhoods or wherever we are, but it also means on a larger scale in the world.

We must be people who insist that the way to bring peace into our world is through forgiveness, reconciliation and love, not through violence, war and death. No, that's not the way of Jesus. It's always reaching out to draw people in. It's really extraordinary what Jesus asks of us, his church. Then, if you listen to the passage in the Acts of the Apostles, you discover something else truly extraordinary, why we have to be a new creation and live in a different way.

Did you hear what Luke said about that first community? He said, "There's no one in need among them." This is a poor community of Jerusalem, but everyone is OK. They have what they need because they all share what they have. They all recognize that whatever I have is a gift from God. It's not for me alone. It's for all those who are in need. So that first community gives us an extraordinary example of what Jesus asks of us. We must share. We must make sure that insofar it's possible for us, no one is in need.

We have to restrain the evil. Not only be reconciling, but also restrain evil. That would mean the evil of violence and war, the evil of suffering, the evil of hunger and the evil of sickness, which people don't have resources to take care of. We have to restrain all of that and make the world into the Reign of God. The task before us is really immense. I want to remind us what John said in that letter that we read today as our second lesson: "Because all those born of God overcome the world, the victory which overcomes the world is our fate."

We overcome the world by living in relationship to Jesus. That's what faith means. So the closer we are to Jesus, the more we can affect restraining evil, and spreading the goodness and love that Jesus asks of us. In the world in which we live, the evil that has been part of the world -- when John in the Gospel and in this letter talk about the world, he doesn't mean his part of creation. That's good. He's not condemning the world that God made, but evil has infected the world.

We have to overcome death, and there are extraordinary ways that we must overcome evil because evil is so extraordinary. I brought along a clipping that I read recently. The headline is UNICEF, United Nations Education Foundation. The report says children in deprivation in our world reach a billion. The article starts, "More than a billion children, more than half the children in the world, suffer extreme deprivation because of war, HIV/AIDS or poverty."

While there have been gains in reducing the death rates of young children and in increasing the number of children in school, the report said that some of the progress made over the past decade has been offset by the toll taken by war, AIDS and deprivation. Nearly half the estimated 3.6 million people killed in war since 1990 have been children. Our world is in distress. We must overcome that. We must change the world. We must transform it.

This is what we're called to do. This is why Jesus sends the Holy Spirit upon the church there in that upper room in Jerusalem. This is why Jesus brings the Holy Spirit into our church today, right now, among us, so that we can accept that Holy Spirit, let it transform our hearts, bring us into closer relationship with Jesus in faith so that our faith now can transform the world. So when we celebrate baptism today and confirmation, all of us who are already baptized and confirmed must renew our commitment to accept that Holy Spirit from Jesus and let the Spirit change us.

We must let the Holy Spirit give us the ability to restrain evil, to transform our world, to bring reconciliation,

forgiveness and love, to share our material goods the best way we can so that the Reign of God will break forth among us in a more clear and powerful way. We celebrate our baptism and our confirmation, and we welcome these new members of our community to be confirmed today with great joy, and together with them, we all commit ourselves now to do the work that Jesus has given to us.

"Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven. The evil you restrain, it is restrained." Share whatever you have so that the goods of the world are for all and now for a few. There is our task. That is the commitment we make today as we celebrate baptism and confirmation for these three people, but also, we celebrate the renewal of our baptism and our confirmation as we accept the gift of the Holy Spirit once more and accept the challenge of Jesus: "As God sent me, so now I send you."

[Homily given at St. Charles Borromeo, Detroit. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. **Sign up here** [2] to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

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