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Where we find peace in our hearts

Thomas Gumbleton | May. 11, 2012 The Peace Pulpit

At the end of our first lesson today, St. Luke describes how that first Christian community lived and what was happening to them. He says, "The church was at peace and was built up throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria with eyes turned to God and the church lived, filled with comfort from the Holy Spirit." In a couple of other places in the Acts of the Apostles, St. Luke describes how that early Christian community was at peace.

You may remember a couple of Sundays ago, Luke described how the community found that there was no one among them that was in any kind of need because they brought everything they had and shared it. They shared with one another whatever they had so that no one was in need and so they were living in great peace.

Earlier on in the Acts, Luke had described how they would come together at the temple and pray, and then regularly they would break bread together -- celebrate the Eucharist as we're doing now.

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Acts 9:26-31

Ps 22:26-27, 28, 30, 31-32

1 John 3:18-24

John 15:1-8

Full text of the readings [1]

It was a community, Luke says, where they loved one another and they were at peace.

In fact, as Luke says at the end of today's lesson, they continued to grow in numbers. What has happened? I don't think many of us would describe our church community now as living in peace. There is a lot of turmoil going on in our church and it's disturbing to people, disturbing to me, disturbing to all of us.

We're certainly not growing in numbers. In fact, it's reported, based on accurate surveys, that there are 30 million Ex-Catholics in the United States. Thirty million that have left our church. I'm sure many of us would say that it has happened in your family. A lot of our younger people who have been baptized, even gone to Catholic school right through Catholic university -- they're walking away.

Of course, there are so many problems. Just this past week, or within the last 10 days, I think all of us became aware how, from the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, an investigation is going to go on about the United States nuns -- those who've perhaps have been most faithful in our church serving the poor, educating our children, serving in hospitals, and taking care of the sick. Just today I read in the paper about Philadelphia: five more priests are defrocked and forbidden to function as priests forever because of the sex abuse scandal.

So there are many things that are happening in our church that cause turmoil to go on. There are at least three dioceses in the United States where because the bishop has decreed the closing of certain parishes, they've gone to court. The Cleveland diocese took their case to Rome -- to the church court, and the decision of the bishop was reversed.

So there's this turmoil, struggle going on within our church, and we wonder what happened? What has happened

to make the church today so different from the way Luke describes it? While in fact, Luke was giving sort of an idealistic picture of the church because there was turmoil going on then too.

Paul, who had gone to Damascus to imprison Christians but then experienced that extraordinary conversion where remember, he was knocked to the ground and then he heard the voice saying, "Why do you persecute me?" "Who is it that I'm persecuting?" "It is Jesus," and then Paul is converted. But now he comes to Jerusalem and the people are afraid of him. Barnabus intervened and so they accepted him for a while, but then he has to flee because they're going to kill him. Paul was preaching kind of like a firebrand and people didn't like it and so they were driving him away.

There wasn't always peace and quiet in the early church. There were times where people were fighting with one another and disillusioned with what was happening in the church.

But Luke gives us an understanding of the church that's at peace and yet again, there were times where St. Paul, later on to the church at Corinth, criticizes that community because he says, "You're making distinctions between the rich and the poor. When you come to celebrate the Eucharist, the poor are kept outside on the edge of the community and the rich celebrate together, so there's this huge division."

Or another time, Paul criticizes Peter because (this is in the letter to the Galatians) Paul says to Peter, "You're a hypocrite!" Can you imagine that? That was going on in the church. Peter and Paul, the two leading apostles in our historical remembrance of the church, are at odds with one another. Well, how could Luke then say, "This community is at peace." I think the answer is found in today's gospel.

We can find the same thing ourselves. If we feel some of the turmoil that is going on in our church, we're discouraged. Maybe we're even tempted to walk away as so many people have.

What does Jesus say in the Gospel? He says, "I am the vine; you are the branches," and what he's talking about is that there's more to being a disciple of Jesus and following Jesus than belonging to the Catholic Church. It's an institution, it's important and I would never want to leave the church and I hope I never would, but that's not the most important part of being a disciple.

It's the fact that Jesus lives in me and I in him. That's what he means when he says, "I am the vine; you are the branches." We are in Jesus and Jesus is in us.

Think about a vine and how dependent the branches are on the vine. It's the same life that flows through the branches that flows through the vine. There could not be a deeper connection and that's what we have to nurture within our hearts is our relationship to Jesus to try and deepen our awareness that I live in Jesus and Jesus lives in me.

What's happening in the church around us? Yes, it'll be important to us and we'll try to make it better, but it won't tempt us ever to leave because we would not want to be separated from Jesus if we're very deeply aware that he lives in us and we live in him.

If we really begin to accept that, think about what that means when we interact with one another: when we interact with one another, we're carrying on and carrying out the message that Jesus gave to us to 'love one another as I have loved you.'

When we think of Jesus living in us and living in all of us, when we love each other, we're loving Jesus, and that gives us greater motivation to make sure we bring about reconciliation if it's broken down, if our community is breaking down in any way. If we find turmoil in our church, we can still love and reach out in love.

As John tells us today, it has to be more than just words; it has to be action, in deeds -- love one another. That's how we will be at peace in our hearts and in our church.

If we reach out in love to one another and if we do that because each of us shares deeply in the life of Jesus and then we nurture our relationship with Jesus who is the vine of which we are the branches. When we learn to deepen that love and that living in Jesus, that is possible because Jesus invites us to be branches on the vine, which is Jesus.

When we live that way, then we too will be at peace in our hearts and our church too will begin ever more to be at peace and perhaps we too will find as Luke said about that first disciple -- first community of disciples -- they continued to grow in numbers. So will we, but especially we will begin more and more to experience the peace that comes from being deeply united with Jesus.

[Homily given at St. Ann Church in Frankfort, Mich.]

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