

Sixth Sunday of Easter(C), 2010, Mothers' Day Weekend

Good morning. It's again a pleasure to have the honor of sharing some reflections with you today. It's especially an honor to share these words on Mothers' Day Weekend. That's right, it's Mothers' Day WEEKEND – Joan reminds me of that, every year.

I hope you recognized today's gospel as coming from the night of the Last Supper, in fact from just a few minutes after Jesus stunned his apostles by washing their feet. As you just heard, in our passage for today, Jesus says, "Whoever loves me will keep my word," and follows it immediately by saying these words that we hear every time we celebrate the Eucharist, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you," and he then adds "Not as the world gives do I give it to you."

And then it is but a few hours later that Jesus shows by his personal actions just how far this peace goes that he is talking about. For when they come to seize Jesus in the garden, Peter draws a sword and strikes, but Jesus tell him to put it away, and heals the ear. And when he is dying on the cross, being mocked by those who are torturing him, he prays, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."

It was very clear for Christians in the early Church what those words of peace meant. For of course, those words went along with other clear teachings from Jesus about peace and love, such as in Matthew's account of the Beatitudes, when Jesus says "Blessed are the Peacemakers, for they will be called Children of God." And just so there would be no mistake, Jesus went even further: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." And in Luke, Jesus puts it this way: "If you only love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them... Love your enemies... and you will be children of the Most High."

I say again, it was very clear for early Christians what those words of peace meant, because for 300 years Christians refused to engage in war. For three centuries, no Christian teacher or author that we know of approved of Christian participation in battle, and involvement in the army even in peacetime was frowned upon. The early Church theologian Tertullian had pithy advice for soldiers who converted to Christianity: quit the army, or be martyred by the army for refusing to fight.

It should be obvious by now that I'm going somewhere with this homily, but before any of you turn me off – please, don't. First, I'm not going to talk politics today. And second, there are people I love and honor here in our parish. I remember when Onny Tabares returned from Iraq – he was sitting right here in front, and we rejoiced that he got home safely, and could return to the classroom as a teacher. And I officiated at the wedding of Dan Bugbee and Jennifer Cross, and prayed very hard for Dan when he loyally served his tours in Iraq, so that he could return home safely. And I know there are many others in this parish... in our parish Hall you can see that lovely needlepoint with the Prayer of St. Bridget – it was made by Admiral Frank Helmer, one of our parish founders. I always stop and thank God when I see 90-year old Captain Earl Vanderwalker walk slowly and courageously and very determinedly to his seat right over there on the weekends.

These are **good men!** And yet, we cannot just erase the words of Jesus about peace, or deny the example of his life, and we should *not* try to water down or explain away his words somehow. Jesus said them and lived them, and the early Christians knew what he meant.

Today, I want you to just consider something else, and pray about it. That something is a myth, but it is not a Christian myth; it's a very old myth that pre-dates Christianity. If you google the word "myth," you will find that a myth is "a traditional or legendary story, usually concerning some being

or hero, with or without a basis of fact or natural explanation.” All of us here have read stories that embody this particular myth. We’ve all watched TV shows and movies that retell its storyline. Our children learn this myth from their earliest years, in their cartoons and comic books, and they play video games that teach them this myth. I first heard this myth given a name a couple of years ago in this book, “The Powers That Be, written by a theologian and scripture scholar named Walter Wink, and it’s called the “Myth of Redemptive Violence” and it is *the real myth of the modern world*. This myth enshrines the belief that it is violence that is redemptive (not the cross); it is violence and the threat of violence that protects us and saves us, and therefore it is violence that we must trust in. It is one of the oldest continuously repeated stories in the world, and this belief is so successful because it doesn’t seem to be “mythic” in the least.

Let me read you a simple example...this one’s from my childhood. Popeye and Bluto! *“In a typical segment, Bluto abducts a screaming and kicking Olive Oyl, Popeye’s girlfriend. When Popeye attempts to rescue her, the massive Bluto beats Popeye to a pulp, while Olive Oyl helplessly stands by and wrings her hands. At the last moment, as our hero oozes to the floor, and Bluto is trying, in effect, to rape Olive Oyl, a can of spinach pops from Popeye’s pocket and spills into his mouth. Transformed by this infusion of power, he easily demolishes the villain and rescues his beloved. The format never varies. Neither party ever gains any insight or learns from these encounters. They never sit down and discuss their differences. Repeated defeats do not teach Bluto to honor Olive Oyl’s humanity, and repeated beatings do not teach Popeye to swallow his spinach **before** the fight.”*

Once you understand this pattern you can begin to see it endlessly. Nothing kills the hero, though for the first ¾ of the story he (rarely she) suffers a lot and appears doomed, until he miraculously breaks free, vanquishes the villain, and restores order. Examples for children would include Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, the X-Men, Transformers, the Fantastic Four, the Superman family, the Lone Ranger and Tonto, Batman and Robin, Spiderman, even Tom and Jerry. Estimates vary, but the average child is reported to log roughly 36,000 hours of television by age 18, viewing some 15,000 murders. I hope that’s high – but whatever the numbers are, they’re huge. What church can even remotely keep pace with the myth of redemptive violence in hours spent teaching children or, frankly, in the excitement of its presentation?

And if you want to find adult movies, just look at most of the action movies or TV shows – Bruce Willis & all the Die Hard Movies, Clint Eastwood and Dirty Harry, Charles Bronson, all those John Wayne movies, and just about any western you’ll ever see. Hey, they’re all my favorites, ask Joan...

It’s not that we don’t have our own Christian heroes that present better, far nobler and courageous values – **we do!** And it’s not that we don’t have plenty of examples, even in our modern world, where the power of love and nonviolence are stronger than violence – **we do!** In fact, I find it rather ironic to be giving this homily today on Mothers Day weekend, because if mothers were in charge of the myths that we live by, they would be teaching us stories about understanding others, learning how to get along, and resolving our difficulties. And we would have a different world.

I’ve spoken long enough here today, and so I would like just to conclude with words from the beginning of our gospel that I find rather haunting in the light of all this: “Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words.” Amen, and God bless you.

Deacon Denny Duffell, May 8/9, 2010