

A NEW COMMANDMENT

John 13: When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

As his death approaches, Jesus, as anyone would do, considers what will be his legacy. What will remain when he is gone? His direct words and clear direction have been a beacon for Christians ever since. We are to love one another. It is not enough to persevere in running life’s race. Nor can we simply cultivate our own private sense of calling; our intentions inevitably encounter the intentions of others and throw us into conflict. So we are called to love one another as he has loved us.

But as appealing as this sounds, as marvelous a vision as this is, what does it mean? In practical terms what do we have to do? If we are honest we immediately ask, could the changes required of us be too great? Could the obstacles in the way of loving one another be too high? How can we stop running the races we run? How can we treat old enemies as new friends? How can we live in a way that is markedly different, and in a way that makes a marked difference in the world? Can you and I actually live in a better way, a different way, and so change the ways others live for the better?

Theologian Miroslav Volf puts the matter in stark terms. Now he teaches at Yale. But once he was a young student in Croatia where he and his family were suspect. They were evangelical Protestants, and so considered threats to political stability, to the control of a dictatorial regime. At one point Volf himself was interrogated, detained, and beaten. Day after day he came face to face with an officer he now calls simply Captain G. Now a distinguished teacher, and an Episcopalian, Volf does not ignore the toughest of all questions: if we are called by Jesus to love one another, could Volf love Captain G.? Could Volf abandon old wounds and painful memories and truly care for the person who tortured him?

The problem of course is memory. We remember what happened to us. It is burned into our minds. We carry images of the past that become magnified and turn into obsessions. In the case of Miroslav Volf, and millions of people around the world, great harm has been done. Lasting physical and emotional damage. Clearly specific individuals are responsible for these atrocities. The injustice and the pain are unforgettable. They become lasting parts of the victim's life. But for the sake of loving one another as Jesus urges us to do, how can we forget? In what way do we truly move on? How can we stop being the one who has endured suffering and start being the one who brings about reconciliation? How can we love one another as Jesus loves us?

Often whimsical, Albert Schweitzer wrote that happiness is nothing more than good health and a bad memory. The problem is that even if our health is not the best, our memories are likely to function well. We remember the insults and the slights. We remember vividly those who have hurt us or disappointed us. It becomes difficult to step out of the victim role and to let go of those feelings and images that have become obsessions for us. And nowhere in the world makes us more aware of the power of memory than the Middle East. In the contested land

of Israel-Palestine, three great religions hold different understandings, different views of history, and different hopes for the same terrain. And now, there is a complicated legacy of grievance, of destruction and injustice and hurt that cuts across all religious and social lines. How could it ever be possible? How could there ever be a way toward reconciliation, toward peace, when despair and anger and violence seem to control the situation?

Rabbi Marc Gopin, who heads a center for religion and reconciliation at George Mason University, senses a path. In his recent book, Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East, Gopin acknowledges fully the complexity and bitterness of the Israeli and Palestinian situation. He even notes the fault lines within the Jewish, Muslim, and Christian communities. He also readily acknowledges that religion is being used to sanction hatred and violence. All too often, as we are acutely aware, religious categories and ideals are hijacked in the service of hatred. How can we break this misunderstanding and interrupt the cycle of violence? For him it requires stepping into the very core of what we do as religious people. We must create occasions of joint prayer and discussion and celebration. We must construct images of cooperation and understanding that counter the images of despair and destruction. We must do practical things that rewrite the script, that recreate the ways people see and respond to one another.

Of course, religious understanding requires that we have some grasp of what we each believe. It is crucial that Christians, Muslims, and Jews build sympathetic knowledge of each other's sacred texts, of each other's core beliefs. But beneath that we must also tap the vast capacity for goodness each religion encourages. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all emphasize charity, doing good works to benefit those in need. More than agreement on belief, we need practical forms of collaboration on practical issues we face together. Forms of doing

good, coupled with forms of praying together, suggest how we might go forward, how we might reduce suspicion, how we might even work together. Remember, reconciliation does not require that we think alike: reconciliation means living together in the midst of disagreeing on some things, even things that could be deemed crucial. It is the living together, and working together, that truly build a new way to be together.

In his own way, the writer and philosopher Albert Camus wrestled with this problem. For Camus the issue was basic: how to reconcile the existence of God with the fact of evil in the world. Through his early novels Camus struggled with this question – how could God exist, if evil things happen, some of them in the name of God. Then, in his novel The Plague, Camus found his answer. Set in a north African city, The Plague begins with obvious alienation between a prominent physician and a leading Catholic priest. But the onset of disease in the city forces them together. They can either let people die, or they can look beyond their differences and cooperate to combat the plague. Grudgingly at first, they resolve to collaborate. Of course they never like one another, but liking one another is beside the point. The point is that who they were and what they believed overlapped enough for them to recognize and to respond against a common threat.

Of course this does not always happen so easily. How often we see nations and communities and even families where clinging to the disagreement is more important than facing common challenges. Where retaining the memory of grievance is favored over seizing the opportunity for a new, common future. We may think that loving one another is a good thing in the abstract, but when the practical dimensions become clear, we may prefer our old isolation. We may understand that loving one another is not a sentiment, but sincerely intending the best, and creating the conditions for the best, for the other person. But we may

still be stuck. Still preferring the memories, the images, the assumptions, the prejudices, that have become so familiar. The risk we must take is the risk of stepping away from the familiar into the unfamiliar. Of daring to live and to see and to understand in a new way.

In Monday's homily, I mentioned the life of a woman I will call "Julie." An orphan from Cambodia who found her way to Australia as the Khmer Rouge began their reign of terror. By God's grace she was brought to Perth where she grew up in happy and fortunate circumstances. She received a good education and married happily and had two beautiful children. She even developed a lilting Australian accent and forgot most of her native Khmer language. There was so little memory of Cambodia. And what little there was might have been shunted aside. The memories were painful and complicated. Now she lived comfortably in beauty and peace. She had every reason to forget and to move on. The few people who knew she was turning the old memories over in her mind chided her: come on; that was then, this is now. But she couldn't do it. She could not let go.

But there was a crucial difference from the memories that paralyze us. Julie was not paralyzed. Memory was not the source of obsession and bitterness. Memory was the doorway to wholeness. Her faith taught her that. Julie had become an Anglican in Australia, and her faith tugged at her until she responded. She knew that she had to go back to Cambodia. Not to settle old scores and not even to relive vague images from the past. She had to go back to give something back, to share her good fortune. It became amazingly easy. Her husband found work with a development agency and soon she had a similar job. There are good schools and a ready community of other people working to build a new way of life in a country that once was devastated. Now Julie works in children's programs because she had left there as a child. She feels she is giving

back to children the opportunities she received herself. And she does so because her Christian faith motivates her to do so.

There will be no ready solution to the problems of war or disease or poverty. And there certainly will be no ready solution to the problems our memories pose for us: again and again we will be distracted from God-given possibility and tempted to wallow in old patterns of suspicion and isolation and mistrust and sheer hatred. In two days we will observe Good Friday, and recall that Jesus, the one who calls us to love each other, was sent to the Cross by people who were ruled by suspicion. But in the memory of that evil, we are given a choice: to continue in the old habits, or to break free, to serve, and to be made whole. There are countless examples, and countless people ready to greet us as we break free and live in new ways. It may seem improbable, but we need only remember the path Jesus walked. Beyond Good Friday, there will be Easter. Beyond death, and letting go, there is new life. May we step out of the old confines, and walk the new way, the way that brings life.

Amen.