

19 Pentecost - 11 October 2009 - Proper 23 B
Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31
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It is a great honor and pleasure to be here on the occasion of my colleague Fr. Jim's taking a much-needed, well-deserved vacation. And like Fr. Jim, our passage from Mark today begins with Jesus setting out on a journey. He is approached by a young man who hails him as "Good Teacher"; an affirmation that Jesus quickly disavows, setting the stage for all that is to follow.

The young man wants to know how to inherit eternal life. Evidently, he has inherited plenty in this life already, but perhaps he is feeling some vague emptiness, some gross dissatisfaction, some restlessness, possibly even some remorse. The material goods at his disposal do not seem to be fulfilling and he has come seeking more. He has wisely sought out Jesus and asked for the ultimate inheritance: that of eternal life.

It turns out that, as Jesus probes this man's intentions, we learn about the quality of his life, and how it falls short of being "eternal," of being rooted in the soil of God and the Spirit which alone guarantees satisfaction and salvation.

The young man's journey was not, for all his efforts to keep the commandments, in fact, actually "Godward"; it was, rather, self-righteous bound: a feeble attempt to count himself righteous by his good works, to climb up by his own efforts the righteousness ladder, to puff himself up with points. Jesus knew that what stood in this young man's way was not, in fact, his riches, per se; but rather the reliance he placed on them as an affirmation of his goodness, his worth, his righteousness. As a sign of God's favor of him. And as the stumbling block to the young man's ability to rely ONLY on God; to put his effort not into the manufacture or careful grooming of an external, rule-abiding righteousness, but a deeply internal, radically external trust in God's providence, God's righteousness, God.

So, Mark explicitly tells us, out of LOVE for the young man, not a condescending chastisement, not a meaningless move to create ever more hoops for the young man to jump through, Jesus challenges him paradoxically, pointedly, profoundly, saying, "what you LACK is all the things you possess"; what you own stands powerfully in the way of your even beginning to see the glory of God, the goodness of God, the graciousness of God, the love of God.

I think of my husband's family's maid, Oteru-san, a lovely woman I only met long after she had retired and returned for my father-in-law's funeral. I will never forget the radiance with which she spoke of the fire that burned her house down and took all her possessions. "Thank goodness, no one was hurt!" she said, with absolutely no hint of missing the things she had lost. But rather focused on the miracle of her own life being spared, and the glorious days she had spent in contemplating that fact, in careful observance of and delight in creation ever since. Some people teach us things in ways we might never have imagined for ourselves...never grasped through logic, or training, or rules. Just by the power of their spirits in aligning themselves with the Spirit that animates all things...by their reliance on that, and that alone.

We know this to be true, because Mark goes on to tell us so in still a few more ways. His little riff on the difficulties of "those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God" perplexed the disciples, because they still bought into (so to speak!) the analogy of material wealth as a sign of God's favor, and even they questioned Jesus pointedly and anxiously: if the rich can't buy their way into heaven, who can??? Jesus makes his concern about the poor young rich man clearer here, saying that "for mortals it is impossible" to be saved; but "not for God; for God all things are possible." In other words, relying on our

mortal gifts alone, we should not expect to attain salvation. And another thing: we cannot even coopt God: for Mark and his wise translators in this translation do not allow us to imagine that “WITH” God, we can do anything...but only when it IS God, working through us and our ratifying that work, or in the words of spiritual writer Richard Rohr, when we “second the motion that God makes in our souls” can we anticipate joyfully that it is God at work. That we are on God’s side, remembering that famous phrase uttered by Abraham Lincoln during the torturous days of the Civil War: I am not worried that God is on our side; I am worried that we are on God’s.

And so we come to the end of this passage, where Peter “BEGAN” and Jesus interrupts him, as if to say, “Don’t start with me” or perhaps, “Peter, don’t even go there!” WHY would Jesus do such a thing? It is here, I believe we find final evidence that Mark’s concern is less with riches per se, than the function of having or relinquishing the goods of the world. For Peter tries to achieve JUST the same thing that that poor young rich man was after: self-righteousness according to his own good works: and this time, it was in giving up the goods of the world. Peter enters his plea, as if jockeying for position, hoping for the inside track to God’s approval, righteousness and favor: “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” But Jesus, again, lovingly, won’t let this gesture, no matter how noble, how self-sacrificing, how true to put the disciples AT EASE...to think that by doing so they are done with the Godward journey, the need to pay attention, to attend to the flowering of God’s purpose and their own part in the delightful, sometimes painful process: for Jesus both consoles and warns them: “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children,”—so far, so good, right?

We can imagine the disciples gathering together many brothers and sisters in the work, as they will do, entering and being entertained in many homes, being cared for and provided for by their supporters and friends...but that is not all, Jesus wants them to know: there will also be, in the Godward life, “fields with persecutions”—and in the age to come eternal life. This promise of persecutions reminds me of a wonderful sermon I once heard on the word “and” in a text from the Book of Daniel: as in “there are many doors of opportunity open unto you, AND there will be enemies.” The preacher’s point was, that with any truly significant and good work, it will disturb some, and rouse their discomfort and rancor, to set them on edge and to come after us. Indeed, as this passage from Mark ends, “Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.” This is very upsetting news to those who put a great trust in their “firstness” as a function of their own accomplishments, as a result of their own ego-needs, as an act of the ignorance of the glory and graciousness of God, which brings them all things, good and bad, and is the original author of our righteousness and our love.

I hope that you will join that rich young man on his journey, hopefully, Godward; that whatever shock and despair you have at the prospect of loss—of mothers and children, brothers and sisters, houses and wealth-- may be redeemed in the abundance of brothers and sisters, mothers and children and the eternal life you will enjoy along the way. And that at the last, you will be first to see and enjoy the abundance of God’s love and to sing the praises of God.