

“What Possesses You?”

What is it with people in Mark? They keep running up to Jesus and throwing themselves at his feet. Remember we had the leader of the synagogue who threw himself at Jesus’ feet asking for healing for his daughter. Then we had the Syrophenician woman who threw herself at Jesus’ feet asking for a miracle to save her daughter’s life. Now we have a man throwing himself at Jesus’ feet not for a healing, but because he wants to know how to inherit eternal life. It is a curious scene.

At first Jesus seems to get perturbed at the man, because he calls Jesus “good teacher.” Jesus seems to take this as if the man is trying to flatter him in order to get in his good graces. Jesus then tells the man he has to keep the Commandments. Do you notice anything interesting about the commandments Jesus names? First and most important Jesus leaves out the first four commandments i.e. no other gods but God, no graven images, do not take God’s name in vain, and keep the Sabbath day holy. What’s more the list he gives the man leaves out the commandment not to covet and adds one commandment “do not defraud.”

The missing and added commandments aside, it is interesting that Jesus focuses on the human commandments and ignores the God commandments. Perhaps he assumes that the man keeps the God related commandments because he is Jewish, but Jesus knows that the human commandments are the harder ones to keep even among a religious people. When the man tells Jesus he has been faithful to the commandments since his youth, Jesus’ looks at him with love. He does not remain in his slightly cranky mood we experienced at the beginning of the story. He is genuinely disarmed by this man’s earnestness and attempt to live a good life.

Then he tells the man there is only one thing left to do, sell his possessions and follow Jesus. As the man walks away he is grieved for he has many possessions. We will come back to this point in a minute, but first I want to point out the disciples’ reaction to this situation. They are dismayed that this man or any person of wealth will have a hard time entering the Kingdom of God. They ask Jesus. “Well then who can be saved?” In their culture and in that of the Romans and Greeks, riches were considered a sign of God’s favor. So if a rich person cannot enter the Kingdom, it would seem that no one can Jesus’ response is that “all things are possible with God.”

Which brings me back to the art of the story where the man walks away grieving because he has many possessions. The conventional interpretation of this encounter is that the rich man goes home to his possessions unwilling to give them up for the sake of inheriting eternal life. We look at him with pity and perhaps think that we are much better than him, after all we are here today. We might think it is sad for him. We might even put ourselves in his place and wonder what we would do? We might even think to ourselves that we are glad we did not ask that question. However, they may be other ways to look at this story, and particular the aftermath.

In rabbinic Judaism there is a method of looking at scripture called *midrash*. Midrash is a form of biblical interpretation and commentary on scripture. One form of midrash is to look at the scripture and fill out the story or fill in the backstory. One midrash I find particularly powerful concerns the Hebrew people crossing the Red Sea. When they are dancing and celebrating their safety and triumph over their Egyptian captors, a rabbi wrote that God cried for all of the Egyptian dead. Thus we are

reminded that the Egyptians were humans made in God's image, and valued by God just as all people are.

Let's return to today's story. I am going to ask you to take a moment and ponder Jesus' encounter with the rich man. If you were filling out the story or providing midrash what might you say about this story? Let's take a minute to ponder and see what occurs to us.

[parishioners' thoughts included:

- He goes home grieving because he has people dependent on him. He wonders how he can take care of them and also follow Jesus.
- He grieves the loss of his valuables, but knows what Jesus asks is what he needs to do
- He grieves for the sentimental value of some things that must be given up.
- He grieves his own foolishness in putting so much value on things.

If no one offers it suggest that the ending might be very different from the conventional interpretation. What if the man is determined to sell his possessions? Might he not be grieving the loss of his possessions? Might he not be wondering how he will live as an itinerant follower of Jesus? Might he not be like the prodigal son of Luke's Gospel who comes back emptyhanded but ready to serve? He might also be headed home thinking he cannot possibly follow Jesus' command but over time he starts doing just that.

I am reminded of the saint we celebrated last weekend, St. Francis. When he first heard the call of Jesus he did not know what to do. But he started by hugging a leper, praying in a ruined church and then rebuilding that church. His conversion culminated in his stripping naked in the town square, handing his clothes back to his father, and proclaiming that from that moment on his only father was his father in heaven.

From that day forward he lived a life of poverty. He begged for food, he did not have a home, and he renounced all possessions except his tunic which can be seen in Assisi today. When I look at it I do not know where the patches begin and the original cloth ended. It seems mostly patches.

Few of us are called and immediately drop everything to follow Jesus. Likewise, most of us do not come to Jesus running and falling at his feet. We come as the result of a journey. The journey may have windings, wrong turns, and back tracking along the way. Perhaps that is the way it is supposed to go. Perhaps our lives are more like that of the rich man than the disciples. Jesus looks at us as he looked at that rich man—with love.

Whatever those things are that keep you from God, keep getting rid of them. Even as you grieve their loss you are opening our heart to your fellow strugglers, and to Jesus and ultimately to God which is your true home or your life and your heart.