

Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

October 14, 2012

This Gospel has a touching moment that no other Gospel has. In the middle of the story, we hear, “Jesus, looking at him, loved him.” It is one of those beautifully human moments that Mark frequently has. Mark’s Jesus is very human: he gets angry and exasperated and loses his “cool.” And, here, he looks at a person and loves him – a deeply human response.

Why wouldn’t he? The man was an enthusiast. Running up to Jesus, falling on his knees, calling Jesus “Good teacher,” he revealed himself to be a person who wanted to do more, to have his focus in life on the future, the ultimate future, eternal life. And he wanted more: not just the good life, but eternal life. He realized that it was a matter of some responsibility on his own part. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

And when Jesus reminds him that choosing to live the Torah is to choose life, he says back, I do that already. I have done all that, ever since I was a child. And you don’t get a sense of arrogance or pride but of simple fact. And that’s when Mark writes: “Jesus, looking at him, loved him.”

Jesus then goes on: Well, that being the case, only one thing is missing. Let go of all your possessions, give them to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, then come and follow me. But this is too much for him. Enthusiasm evaporates; energy dissipates. “His face fell, and he went away sad,” Mark says simply, “for he had many possessions.” He had a lot of stuff. The man was willing to do more, but he was unable to do with less.

We know Jesus didn’t ask everyone to sell everything and give it to the poor. In Luke’s Gospel, Zacchaeus voluntarily cut up the pie: “Behold, *half* of my possessions, Lord, I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone, I shall repay it four times over.” Also in Luke, the women traveling with Jesus and the disciples helped to support them, which means they didn’t sell everything.

What happens here points out that *sometimes* the call comes to surrender all and take hold of the Kingdom of God and let everything else go. While the wisdom of the world says you can have it all, the wisdom of God's Word suggests otherwise.

The words of Jesus today invite reflection. It is hard to enter the Kingdom if you have a lot. If your hands – and your heart – are already full with possessions and obsessions, there might not be any room for God's presence.

Jesus' words to his disciples might strike us as "sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow." These words call us to think about what we have, and what has us. They invite us to discern what holds our hearts captive, and to stand in the presence of God, "naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must render an account," as Hebrews puts it. The response of the disciples can be our own, "Then who can be saved?" And Jesus' words drop softly on our hearts urging us to trust: "For human beings it is impossible, but not for God. All things are possible for God."

Today's Word of God can evoke feelings of guilt. We are a pretty comfortable community; most of us have little fears about food or shelter, or basic human needs. Our children are cared for, our responsibilities are met, our future is as secure as one might hope for in these insecure times. But Jesus' words today call us to look beyond our lives, to the needs of the poor.

Nobody likes to feel guilty, but I think guilt is like cholesterol. There is good cholesterol and bad cholesterol; so too with guilt. Bad guilt can immobilize you, making you lose sight that you are God's son or daughter. Good guilt helps you get off the dime and get moving, opens you to the possibility of making some changes, so you are able to receive the Kingdom of God, which is God's presence now, in your life.

That is where wisdom comes in, the wisdom that is a gift. And wisdom *will* come as the First Reading today reminded us: "I pleaded, and the spirit of wisdom came to me." To welcome wisdom is to welcome God's presence, before which all else fades. It takes time for us to live without wanting to cling to our things, it takes time to live with open hands.

Every time we come to communion we can signal to God that this is what we want, approaching the table with our hands extended. When we take the cup of salvation, we can do so with both hands. And we can continue to pray this way each day always with open hands. May we come to know this truth about God's wisdom: "All good things together came to me in her company, and countless riches at her hands."

Paul A. Magnano

Pastor