

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time - B

Apparently, this is a true story...

It happened at a church in suburban Minneapolis. The person telling the story was a young woman who, upon arriving at church one Sunday morning, noticed a shabbily dressed man standing outside the church begging for money.

She wasn't sure what to do if he approached so she decided to avoid eye contact and walked quickly into church.

Right before Mass began, noticed the man had now come inside the church and was looking for a place to sit.

Like a passenger on a plane with an empty seat next to her, she was hoping he wouldn't take a seat next to her. To her relief, the man sat somewhere else. She noticed others in the church giving him side-glances, looking at him warily.

When everyone rose to sing the "alleluia" before the Gospel she saw that the man had left his pew and was walking up the main aisle. She had a panicky feeling in her stomach and was anxious about what might happen next.

When the singing stopped, the shabbily dressed man walked up to the pulpit and read the Gospel. He then returned to his seat and sat down.

It has been a set-up! The shabbily dressed man had been in cahoots with the pastor: He was a plant! The pastor came to the pulpit and said,

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“The message of today’s reading is, ‘It’s the poor who announce the good news.’”

In his admonition to his fellow believers in the 1st century St. James says something similar: “Did not God choose those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith?”

I can certainly attest to the fact that many poor people have a richer faith than me. It’s the only way they make it through the day while I all too often rely on my own devices and don’t show myself to be a person of faith at all.

As far as external appearances go, there’s nothing to distinguish me from someone who does not believe in God. I give the impression that I’m making it on my own.

I recognize that something needs to change. The recipe provided by James points the way: “If you want to be rich in faith, embrace your poverty. If you are not materially poor, then embrace your poverty of spirit.”

For me, poverty of spirit so often takes the form of having more to do than I think I can manage. I look at the week ahead and wonder how I’m going to get everything done. I can panic, and suffer the paralysis that comes with that, or, if I remember, I can put the week in the hands of God and depend on him getting me through.

Apparently, that works. Here I am, still standing upright.

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The biggest barrier to the life of faith is comfort. When we have arrived, that's when we have to be careful. That's when the temptation to rely only on ourselves, or our 401K, or the fact that the mortgage is paid off, is greatest.

In every Christian life there is the call to go beyond ourselves and be of service to others. And if we really respond to that call, it won't take long before we'll be working on the edges of our capabilities, being pushed past comfort and getting our hands dirty, our heartstrings tugged by the needs of others. We'll have the chance to experience the poverty of spirit that knows we can't do it without God.

Not to worry! That's where the riches of a faith-filled life await. If that's what we want, it is there for the taking.

At the beginning of his last will and testament St. Francis made it clear that the turning point in his life was the day that he got off his horse and embraced the leper, overcoming his deep aversion to do so.

And what he discovered was that the leper was Christ, who embraced him back and offered him the sign of peace. From there there was no turning back. He had discovered his heart's true desire and pursued it unswervingly from then on out.

God is our hearts' desire. He will fulfill it if we are willing to be poor enough to receive it.

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1. Story of the young woman and the shabbily-dressed man.
2. A set-up: the pastor had planned it to make a point: “It’s the poor who announce the good news.”
3. 2nd reading: James says, “Did God not choose the poor in the world to be rich in faith?”
4. My experience: Many poor people are richer in faith than I am. It’s how they make it through the day.

Me: I all too often rely on my own devices, give the impression that I’m making it on my own.

5. James paraphrased: “If you want to be rich in faith, embrace your poverty. If you are not materially poor, embrace your poverty of spirit.
6. For me, poverty of spirit takes the form of having more to do than I can manage. There’s not enough of me to go around.

Can cause panic, paralysis. OR if I remember, I put the week into the hands of God, depending on him to get me through.

7. Seems to be working. I’m still standing.
8. Biggest barrier to becoming rich in faith: comfort!

When we have arrived, that’s when the temptation to rely only on ourselves is greatest. God takes a backseat, faith takes a backseat.

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9. The universal Christian call: to go beyond ourselves in service of others.

If we respond it won't take long to experience poverty of spirit.

Working on the edges of our capabilities, being pushed past comfort, getting our hands dirty, our heartstrings tugged by the needs of others

We'll experience poverty of spirit and know we can't do it without God.

10. Not to worry! That's where the riches of a faith-filled life await. If that's what we want, it is there for the taking.

11. St. Francis' Testament: He says the turning point was when he went among the lepers and showed them mercy. In that act, he experienced the peace of Christ.

Then there was no turning back. He had discovered his heart's desire.

If we desire God, we have to be willing to be poor enough to receive him. Putting ourselves out there is the best way to do that.