

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

The encounter between Jesus and the rich man is one of the most fascinating conversations in all the Gospels, I think.

For one thing, there is the initial exchange, which seems so conventional that we can easily overlook it. From the sound of Jesus' first response we can trust that we can inherit eternal life simply by observing the commandments.

That's good news! That's something we can work with! I know we have to examine our consciences to make sure that we are doing that, but there's really not much mystery to it all.

If the rich man had stopped there, he would have been fine. But then, the conversation gets really interesting. The rich man comes to Jesus filled with tension. In spite of the fact that he has all he needs to live on and then some, he is looking for something more. There's a deep dissatisfaction with his life that his wealth cannot address. Nor could a conventional approach to religion.

It appears that he had this inner longing that was pushing him to do more, to seek more. It could be that he wanted eternal life so much that he could not rest until he had it.

When Jesus hears him say that he's already been observing the commandments from his youth, it gives him a window into the rich man's soul and he sees there someone who is ripe for hearing about the "something more" that he was seeking.

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Jesus looked at him and loved him because he was just the sort of person Jesus was looking for—someone ready to open their heart even more completely to God.

“Go and sell what you have, and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come follow me.” Unlike in other situations where Jesus does not allow a person to join his company, Jesus sees in this man’s case the makings of a disciple, a candidate for his inner circle.

Jesus teaches that the next step really has two parts: the emptying part and the filling part.

The goal of the rich man’s seeking can only be arrived at by attending to both parts. First, he must be emptied. He must divest himself of those things which are filling his life. Only when that is done, will he be able to experience the fullness of life which comes with intimacy with Jesus.

The second part involves Jesus inviting him to follow him and in that invitation is the promise that eternal life will be part of the bargain. It will entail identification with Jesus and his mission.

We easily forget about the two-part movement that Jesus offers us as the remedy for the restless searching our heart is doing. We forget about the emptying part and get stuck in trying to do more, to fill our lives more even though they are already too full.

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A common complaint of Catholic Christians is that we do not have time to pray. Or, we put it in other words. We make a commitment to pray more, but since we haven't emptied ourselves first, the extra prayer just makes us more tired. We're doing too much and adding one more thing, even though it's a good thing, just will not work.

Jesus told the rich man to go and sell what he had and then to follow Jesus. Even if we cannot take Jesus' advice that far, it's still good advice for us to attend to the two-part action of getting rid of something in order to gain something else

And it doesn't even have to start with our material possessions. It could be what we fill our time with. If eternal life really hinged on being available to God for 20 more minutes per day, why wouldn't we do that? Is every twenty-minute segment of our day more important than eternal life, or are some of them just filler?

My life is not that full, I have to admit. I waste more than 20 minutes even before I've made it to lunch! Maybe we can get rid of watching late-night TV, for example, so that we can get up 20 minutes earlier the next day and give God some room to speak to us. Is watching the late news really that important?

The rich man went away sad. He had a longing but he had not figured on having to give up anything. He seems to have been looking for

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something more to do without taking the first step in the two-step process.

We can hope that he thought about what Jesus said, though, and let it work on him. He still could have come around at some later point in time and decided to follow Jesus.

We can do that, too. It's never too late. But it will always mean letting go of something we have, even if it's only time in front of the TV, for the sake of being able to receive the one thing we seek. There's no way around that.

Let's pray we have the good sense to recognize Jesus' look of love and his desire that we have what he has, and make that two-step process a part of our lives: letting go so as to receive.

We have his promise that if we do that, we have nothing to fear. His eternal life will be ours, too.

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1. One of the most fascinating conversations in all the Gospels
2. Jesus' first response is quite conventional: follow the commandments and inherit eternal life.
3. Then things get interesting: that's not enough for the rich man.

Even with all he needs and then some, he's looking for something more.

Neither wealth nor conventional moral living can satisfy his longing.

Feels a need to do more, seek more

4. Music to Jesus' ears. It's just such seekers that Jesus is looking for. He invites the rich man to discipleship, to become one of his traveling companions. That's where the "more" can be found.
5. Response will require 2 steps: a) emptying to make room for God; and b) experience the fullness of the kingdom in the following of Jesus and the intimacy that produces.
6. The first step can be easily forgotten. The result: we simply try to address our restlessness by doing more. We try to fit God into a life that has no room for him.

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7. A common complaint: “I don’t have time to pray.” Or put another way, we commit to praying more, but since we haven’t done any emptying, the extra prayer just makes us more tired. We try to add one more thing to the too much we’re doing already.

Step 2 needs step 1

8. Rich man’s sadness comes from his not expecting that Jesus’ response would involve giving anything up.

He was looking for something more to do, not for doing something less.

9. Maybe he came around eventually. We can hope so.

We can still come around, too, but that will always mean letting go of something, even if it’s only time in front of the TV. Sometimes it comes down to something that simple.

10. Let’s pray to have the good sense to recognize Jesus’ look of love and his desire that we have what he has and make the 2-step process a part of our lives: letting go so as to receive.

We have his promise that if we do that, we can rest easy. His eternal life will be ours, too.