

Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." (Mark 20:21)

Sometimes, when I am preparing for a sermon, I like to look at what I wrote about a reading before. Three years ago, when this particular Gospel reading came around, I was smart enough to be on the Camino so I didn't get to preach on this text. Six years ago, I was smart enough to invite a guest preacher. Nine years ago, I did already work for the church but I wasn't a regular preacher yet, so I didn't have to worry about the different moods of the lectionary. No such luck this time.

These past few weeks, Mark has presented us with the difficult words of Jesus. No sage words that inspire pious reflection, but rather challenging and sometimes even harsh words that leave us uncomfortable. Two weeks ago, we heard Jesus teach his followers: if your hand leads you to sin, cut it off; if your eye leads you to sin, pluck it out. (cf. Mark 9:43-47). Last week, we heard Jesus teach his disciples: whoever divorces one and marries another, they are committing adultery. (cf. Mark 10: 11-12) This week, we hear Jesus say to the rich man wanting to follow Jesus: sell everything you own and give your money to the poor. (cf. Mark 10:21) With difficult teachings like this, it's a miracle Jesus still has followers left.

The small peek Mark gives us into the conversation between Jesus and the man wanting to follow him is rich in detail. As Jesus is getting ready for a journey, a man runs up and kneels before him. We do not know his name nor his identity, but he assumes a position of humility. Jesus might warmly welcome a new follower, especially as he prepares himself to make that fateful journey into Jerusalem. "What must I do to inherit eternal life," the man asks Jesus. A fair question of any new follower: "What must I do to be saved; what must I do to be counted as a follower?" A question we still may ask ourselves today. But rather than lay out a detailed mission plan or proclaim an agenda for faithful people to follow, Jesus echoes the Ten Commandments: you shall not murder; you shall not steal; you shall not commit adultery, and so on. In other words, Jesus says: you already know what to do! And the man responds: "Teacher, I have kept all these [commandments] since my youth." (Mark 10:20)

We might hear it as the boast of a man proclaiming his own perfection – I keep all the commandments – but actually it is the proclamation of a faithful man, acknowledging that he is not done learning yet. It is the proclamation of a man who says: "I do my best, but I still feel like something is missing; that something remains beyond my grasp." Sometimes I pray I could have this man's honesty.

In response, Jesus looks at him and loves him. (Mark 10:21a) It's a brief half verse that we so quickly pass over, but in the Gospel according to Mark, the word love is only used

three times. In the twelfth chapter, when asked which commandment is the greatest, Jesus says: The first commandment is this love God; and the second commandment is equal to it, love your neighbor. (cf. Mark 12:30-31) And today it is said that Jesus loves the rich man who wants to follow him. But the love of Jesus doesn't equate to a free pass into the Kingdom of God. No, Jesus says: "first, sell what you own and give the money to the poor, you will have treasure in heaven." -- The man despairs for he had many possessions.

Preparing for this sermon today, I was reminded of the story about Charles Feeney, who died two years ago. Born during the Great Depression as the son of Irish immigrants, Feeney experienced poverty early on. As a young man, Feeney joined the U.S. Airforce, and the G.I. Bill enabled him to earn a bachelor's degree from Cornell University. He would go on to develop the "Duty Free Shoppers" network and amassed a fortune of seven and a half billion dollars. Charles Feeney's story is a true 'rags-to-riches' tale that fuels the imagination of the American Dream; or at least that part of the Dream that has to do with self-made fortunes, because we sometimes forget there is so much more to that Dream than money alone. But that's a different story. Feeney's story doesn't end with ever-growing fortunes. In 1982, he transferred all his assets into a philanthropic foundation, and he started to give his money away. Not just the rich earnings of a base endowment, as a responsible fund manager might do, but all of it: dividends and principle. When Feeney died in 2023, his once vast fortune had all been spent, but he leaves behind a legacy of generosity and kindness. We might wonder, is this the life Jesus invited the rich young man to, when he said: "sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven."

The temptation of this Gospel reading is that we think we may need to be like Charles Feeney and all the other generous saints of this world, and indeed sell all our possessions to the benefit of the poor and needy. It may leave us feeling guilty for the things we own, especially for the things we own in abundance or in excess. But the temptation is also that we twist and turn Jesus' words in such ways that we can piously pretend that Jesus does not challenge us to think about how we relate to our possessions. Another temptation is that we turn Jesus' difficult words into a divinely ordained investment scheme. If you invest a hundred dollars into ministry, God will reward you with a thousand dollars, or at least with blessings of equivalent or greater value. This is at the heart of the prosperity Gospel, and it is far removed, I believe, from what Jesus wants us to learn.

Jesus looked at the rich man and loved him. Jesus did not desire his despair and grief. Jesus loved him and gave him an invitation to say: now you love me.

As human beings we long for a safety net – we make plans and backup plans, we save for rainy days, and we look for a way out when the going gets tough. It's not a bad thing – it is what keeps us safe in harmful settings. But it can also hold us back from fully committing to a thing. Some people plan their next career move before they have even settled into their current job. Some people spend their lifetime with one, wondering if the one-who-got-away would have led to a more exciting life. Some people will never

embrace their extraordinary talents because they remain captive to fears and embarrassment. To really, fully, and completely commit yourself is difficult. And in some ways, goes against our very nature.

And yet, this is exactly the thing about God's grace. We cannot fully appreciate and understand the unconditional love God has for each of us, if our heart remains vested in some internalized insurance policy.

In the end, I empathize with the rich man. The invitation Jesus issues him is difficult, and he is left to despair alone how he is going to divest himself from all that holds him back from stepping into a relationship of trust in God alone. As a church community, we have each other as we struggle with the same questions. Plus, the Gospel reminds us again and again: we don't have to figure it all out before we follow Jesus. No, we will learn along the way and indeed may not fully figure it out until we find our rest in him. Amen.