

Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B
Wis 7:7-11
Ps 90:12-17
Heb 4:12-13
Mk 10:17-30

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If you watch just about any NFL game on television, it seems that at some point the camera will be trained on a sign hand-lettered to say “John 3:16.” It’s a Bible verse, from the Gospel of John, from Jesus’s conversation with Nicodemus: “God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten son, that whosoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life.” Everlasting life. Later on in John’s Gospel, Jesus tells us that one of the reasons he came into the world was that we “might have life and have it more abundantly.” Fullness of life. Life in abundance.

Today we see a man throw himself on his knees before Jesus. And Jesus looks at him with love. Imagine what that must have felt like, to have Jesus look at you with love in his eyes. What does the text tell us about this man? That he was rich, yes; he had “many possessions.” Nothing here says that he’s a young man. For that bit of information we have to go to the Gospel of Matthew (and Matthew probably wanted to make another point with his version of the story). But here the man says that he’s been keeping the commandments from his youth, which suggests to me that he’s no longer a young man.

Two weeks ago Jesus issued some thunderbolts. “If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, chop it off! If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out!” The Church has never ever applied these words literally. What Jesus is saying is that whatever it is that separates us from God, we don’t need it and should get rid of it. In this story he makes a similar point: if our possessions get in the way of our relationship with God, if our stuff keeps us from getting close to God, we can’t afford to keep it. Jesus announces a topsy-turvy world, a world turned upside down, a world where the blessed are poor people, people in pain, the non-violent, the picked on. The rich? The ones with wealth and power and privilege? They will have a tough time getting into heaven; it will take a special act of God’s grace.

It’s not entirely clear to me that Jesus was referring to this particular rich man. This man is truly a good guy. What I recognize in this story is a man who has reached the point, which many people reach, of wondering, “Is this all there is? Isn’t there something more?” Jesus tells him to obey the commandments, and he says, “I’ve been doing that ever since I was a youngster.” Jesus highlights some of the commandments, and he adds, “Do not defraud.” That’s probably St. Mark’s way of indicating that the man came by his wealth honestly, and not by lying, cheating, or stealing.

I have to wonder if the man isn't hoping that Jesus will do what he did with Andrew, Simon, James, and John, with Matthew and Bartholomew and Judas, that Jesus would invite him to chuck it all and come follow him. But Jesus doesn't say, "Come." He says, "Go." "Go sell what you have and give to the poor." Why didn't Jesus say, "Give your stuff away"? "give it to the poor"? Jesus told the man to sell what he had and to give to the poor. Not to give away the entire proceeds, mind you, but to give to the poor.

I suspect that Jesus was telling this good man to go home – home to his family, his employees, his neighbors, his village – go home to all the people who are depending on him and on his business acumen and his business success, to go home and carry on his business. Not everyone is called to be an apostle. The world and the church and the poor need good, honest, faithful people who will follow Jesus as they earn their livelihoods. If my suspicion is correct, Jesus is telling him to sell what he has instead of giving away his stuff, because there is holiness in the buying and the selling. Similarly, holiness can be found in banking, and law, and medicine, and plumbing, and farming, and engineering, and teaching, and welding, and bricklaying, and bus-driving, and landscaping, and in every honest walk of life.

I don't know whether in Jesus's time people had mid-life crises. I don't know if people got bored with their work or discouraged or depressed over their jobs. I do know that people suffer boredom and discouragement and depression in our own day and age. And I suggest that they might look to the rich man in today's Gospel as a patron saint. He came hoping for liberation from his humdrum existence, hoping for something new, fresh, and exciting, and Jesus sent him home, back to the same old same-old. Jesus told him to go and he went – disappointed I suppose, but nonetheless he went. And when I complete his story, in my mind's eye, I see a man on whom Jesus smiled, a man whom Jesus gazed upon with love, and who for all that experienced a new perspective on his old life. I see a man who because of his encounter with Jesus experienced a new fullness of life.

Here's a suggestion for one way to grow in life everlasting, to have life in abundance. I invite you to pray in the coming week. Try praying without any particular words. Place yourself consciously in the presence of God. Throw yourself at the feet of Jesus. Feel God looking at you with love. Picture God looking at you – and smiling.