

The Rich Young Man

In today's Gospel we have a story about a good man. Life has also been good to him. He is not only virtuous but wealthy, which means in the ancient world, as well as our own, that he is a powerful man, with high status, and lots of friends. A Bill Gates, or Elon Musk for example. And yet he feels something is still missing in his life. He feels dissatisfied, restless. He wants more from life, but does not know what that more is. And so when he spies at a distance this wandering prophet he's heard so much about, he briskly even brusquely approaches him to ask the question that has been haunting him.

"Good teacher what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus responds warily at first. Undoubtedly, then as now, an important person such as him, would have his people, personal assistants, security people, at his side, to buffer him from passerby's who would love to attract his attention, ask him a question about a job perhaps. So rather than welcoming the man, like he would a nobody on the street, he is brusque in turn. "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." Perhaps it's an indirect slap at the man, who seems to think he is so important. And then he proceeds to give the catechism response to the young man's catechism question. "You know the commandments..."

But when the young man impatiently brushes his brusque answer aside, Jesus realizes he is serious. His heart softens. His irritation dissipates. For Jesus recognizes in the young man, no longer a VIP, but a kindred spirit— and so Jesus invites him to drop his entourage, give everything away to the poor and come join him.

But the young man's face falls when he hears Jesus' counsel. He longs for something more--but Jesus tells him that to get it, he has to let go of what he already has. He longs for something more but Jesus tells him that less is more; that to be more, is to live more for others.

Now we may not be as rich as Elon Musk but we can appreciate the young man's disappointment. He lives a life the rest of us can only dream of. I have yet to meet anyone who doesn't think they could use more money. And there are times when we all find ourselves dissatisfied with our lives, times when we too find ourselves wondering if this is all there is, thinking that we must be missing something. And instinctively we think that to be more we must do more, to get more. But what Jesus is saying is that to be more may mean having less, maybe even doing less. What Jesus is saying in effect is that the more we seek is not to be found in how much we have but in how much we give. That the Father is concerned not with how much we do, but with how we do whatever we do. Or, in the words of the old pop song, that happiness is not a matter of having what you want but of wanting what you have.

The young man walks away sad. Not condemned--he is still a good man--but disappointed. As rich as he is, he is not ready to risk what he has on the hope that something more might follow. Jesus is inviting him to become part of the most important movement in human history. But he cannot know that, let alone appreciate it, until he begins to live it. That is the irony, or the challenge in life, that what is really valuable in life can only be fully appreciated through the living of it. True life takes faith.

Jesus walks away sad too. He does not judge the VIP, he simply expresses his own disappointment. “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.” We may not think of *ourselves* as rich, few do, but we may be no less apt to cling to what we do have, to rely on the life we already have, however dissatisfying we may find it at times, rather than to take a chance on a life that would require more faith, more faith in ourselves, in our true selves, more faith in others, in their true selves and ultimately more faith in God whose call we can hear in our discontent, inviting us to join him in a life that offers more. “How hard it is to enter the kingdom of God--It is easier for a camel to pass through the needle’s eye than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

In other words, at first glance, it feels impossible. Now in its historical context, this analogy is not really as ridiculous as it sounds. Like most classical cities, Jerusalem had a defensive wall encircling it. To enter the city you had to pass through one of its gates. A particularly narrow gate with a low clearance, was appropriately named, the needle’s eye. To try to pass through this gate riding high atop a camel would be like those car crash videos with the camera set up at a low railroad overpass. Its usually rental trucks, whose drivers don’t realize how tall their truck is, whose top gets sheared right off. What Jesus is saying is not that entering the kingdom of God is impossible, like trying to thread a needle with a camel. What he is saying is that to enter the kingdom we have to dismount our camel— we have to let go of what we have, all that sets us safely apart from others, all that enables us to proceed above the fray. If we are to be saved, we can’t cling to our own resources, we have to let go.

Can we be saved? Yes and no. We can’t save ourselves--we can’t safely and effortlessly *ride* through life above the fray. We can’t live *that* dream and feel fulfilled. But if we climb down from our camel, lower our guard and place our faith not in our own resources, but in God, then salvation is assured. For not only God can save us, God wants to save us --all of us, but we have to let him.

May we have such faith.