

Sermon by Br. Clark Berge, SSF

Preached at Little Portion Friary

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Proper 23 Year B

Sermon Text: Mark 10:17-31

Where is your heart? What are the things you know for certain you have to have? What are the relationships that are more important to you than anything else? These are the questions that jump out at me as I pray through this morning's Gospel. I think that Jesus is using a sledgehammer to drive home an important point about discipleship—nothing delicate about his language at all!

Where is your heart? In another place in the Gospels, Jesus says where your heart is there your treasure will be also. So here comes this rich young man full of flattery: "Good teacher!" he greets Jesus. Then as if he were inspecting something to buy—a product on e-bay—he says "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" I wonder what answer he was expecting. Maybe he was thinking Jesus would say to him: "You're great just the way you are! Everybody is welcome here. No outcasts!"

I've always been drawn to "come as you are", "everybody's welcome!" evangelism. Maybe it's okay for starters, but you need to go deeper. There's no cheap grace. Because Jesus lists most of the commandments (leaving out coveting, you might have noticed), saying do these things! But the young man wanted more. He wants it all: a slam dunk, home run, standing ovation. "I've done all those things all my life" he says.

What was it about this self-confident, capable, rich young man? Something touched Jesus deeply. The Bible says: "Looking at him, Jesus loved him." It's like looking at the class valedictorian you've been teaching for four years. Or the captain of the football team that just won the playoffs. Jesus loved him. It wasn't a collusive, co-dependent kind of love—"leave it to me and everything will be okay, kid." No: out of love for him Jesus gives him the full challenge. Out of love he holds nothing back. With love he says: "Go, sell all you have and give the money to the poor and come follow me." It's like Jesus only said it because the guy asked. It obviously shocked the disciples. Here was exactly the kind of person they wanted to get with them. He could have contributed lots to their mission. And Jesus drives him off. Then to make matters worse he quips—"it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God."

What happens next I find very interesting. The disciples (Peter—who else) says, “That’s exactly what we’ve done! We’ve left everything to follow you.” I suspect Peter was hoping for affirmation from Jesus: That’s right! And you will inherit eternal life.

Jesus invokes God’s mercy. He paints a picture of abundant blessing for his followers, but then in a very pointed riposte to Peter he warns, “But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

So this isn’t a recipe for eternal life. The whole story turns on the phrase: “all things are possible with God.”

But does it leave you feeling a little riled up? Maybe a little defensive as you mentally list out: laptop, cell phone, 5 pairs of pants, 10 shirts, shoes, paintings, books. Papers! We’ll all be dragged to hell weighed down by bundles of documents, clippings and some real rubbish!

As Franciscans we listen to this passage and we see how St. Francis took the leap. He is the rich young man who sold everything and gave it to the poor. If you ever wondered where he got the idea, this passage is it! And every Franciscan commentator points it out! But how much “indispensible” stuff do we drag around with us? When I joined SSF I was advised to bring 2 suitcases. Period. I sold everything and cashed in my life insurance. I chucked it all. After my yard sale I said: “Why don’t I feel happier? I feel like I just died.”

My friend, a very practical woman said, “But you aren’t dead yet! Just free as a bird!”

Of course Jesus obviously didn’t make everybody face this test. Joanna, Susanna and Mary Magdalene, as Luke points out, paid all the bills for Jesus and his disciples as they trooped around Galilee. I think the difference was that they weren’t looking for cheap affirmation, the assurance that they were okay. They just gave and gave and loved and loved.

Discipleship involves discipline. It means turning our life over to God and going in the Way Jesus showed us. No playing around preaching a Gospel of Prosperity. What do those preachers do with passages like this? Ignore them?

For most of us Franciscans, poverty is a beautiful, liberating thing. We understand it as the source of our authenticity. It is the glue that binds us together. When you voluntarily give up your money and houses and voluntarily move into community housing and rely on the variable fortunes of the (in our case) brothers, you’re opting for a really big life, one hundred times bigger than you ever imagined or could have managed on your own. Look at this place! Think about our brothers around the world. We have 35 homes, coconut plantations in the tropics and a retreat house on the North Sea!!! Yes, you get it all—even persecutions ranging from snide comments to crispy fried letters—I got one with the edges burnt to demonstrate how close I am to burning in hell because I used inclusive language!! It takes a while to recognize the persecutions for what they are, even longer to see how they could ever be a blessing or anything except horrible. And it is pure grace when we are able to be thankful for them (I go in and out of focus on this—it’s hard for me). Because it isn’t about us, it’s about God.

Perhaps this passage functions best as a thing that precipitates a response in us. It is maybe a thread we can follow deeper into the tapestry of our inner life and our community life—religious and secular. The real joy of any Scriptural passage is that it helps us to understand ourselves in Christ. “Who am I Lord, and who are you?” is the classic Franciscan question of discernment—Bonaventure makes it really clear that we must come to know ourselves better and better in Christ. It is only in Christ that we can approach the truth about ourselves.

Jesus is the one who connects us with all creation, the pattern that connects us to the cosmos; it is imperative we get to know ourselves as part of creation, as collaborators with God. Even as people who get tangled in the web and fall short and need help and grace and forgiveness, it is good to know ourselves. Because then we can offer ourselves without flattery, without any kind of deal or bargain. We can offer ourselves to be of service to God. There’s nothing more beautiful than that!

So part of the Good News is that Jesus said what he said: the young man’s grief has been like sand in an oyster for the whole 2000 years of Christianity. It is challenging, irritating; but it produced the pearl of St. Francis. As Francis’ brothers and sisters this is home territory for us, one of the central questions of our life and vocation.