

Homily for Sunday, October 10th, 2021 – 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time



Many people read or listen to these gospel stories as simply stories from the past. When we do that, we easily dismiss them by convincing ourselves that the context of 2000 years ago was so different than our context today, these stories couldn't possibly have anything to tell us, even if they are the words of Jesus. But I would say, the majority

of you, since you come back week after week, are willing to go deeper. Without always being aware of it, one of the characters in the gospel story each Sunday, will speak to you in ways the other characters won't. You may even find yourself nodding and inwardly saying, "That's me. How did this writer, who never met me, peg me so well?" Spiritual author, the late Fr. Henri Nouwen, while encouraging us to see ourselves in the characters portrayed, urged us to ultimately identify with Jesus whose life we are called to follow. So, you are more like this character, at this stage in your life, but you are called, at all stages of your life, to become more like Jesus.

I can see myself in the young, rich man who cannot forsake his possessions to follow Jesus. Much of what I saw as yesterday's luxuries, I've convinced myself that they are today's necessities. I know they are not necessities, but if you try wresting them from my hands, I'll give you the fight of your life.

I've met so many older priests, men and women in religious life, and older lay people who all say the same thing with a wink in their eye, "I was much holier, when I was younger." I was, too. But what we meant by being holy usually centered around: feeling good about ourselves if we never missed Sunday Mass, praying the rosary faithfully, availing ourselves of the sacraments regularly (especially Confession), doing works of charity, and keeping all the Commandment, like the young man in today's gospel. These are all good thing, don't get me wrong. However, they can all come from a sense of duty. The more boxes we could check off, in our youth, the holier we felt. Our relationship, if we were honest, was more with the Law than anything akin to a love affair with God. When you're young, full

of romantic ideals, and see things in a dualistic way—a black and white way, a totally good and totally evil way—then checking off boxes is the natural starting point. We all start there because we were all young at one time.

Hopefully, with age and wisdom, we begin to see the nuances of life, becoming less judgmental, more compassionate, and realizing we have always lived more by God's grace than our own efforts. Notice, the young rich man wants to earn salvation through his own efforts. He says to Jesus, ***“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”*** He sees eternal life, not as a gift from God that we open to, but as another one of his many possessions, a trophy, you might say, for his fireplace mantle. When Jesus tells him only one thing blocks him from eternal life—his possessions—the young man walks away forsaking the invitation and keeping his possessions. I can certainly identify with this young man as I have not always said yes to God's invitation in my own life.

However, just because we never hear from this rich young man again, doesn't mean, for one minute, Jesus was done with him considering him a “write-off”. Here is the key for me, and here is the reason why I think the story did not come to an end when the man walked away from Jesus. Before Jesus gives this guy the hard lesson he does, it says, ***“Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said...”*** This young man was polite, sincere, faithful to the Law, even kneeling before Jesus and acknowledging Jesus as a Good Teacher. Honestly, he could be any one of us here today in this church.

His one flaw, as Jesus sees it, is that this young man does not know the one and only source of Goodness—God, the Father. Jesus, though he is God's son, defers to God as the only source of goodness in the world. In a sense, Jesus is telling this man that he, himself, does not live by his own achievements, his own goodness. Jesus relies totally on the goodness, the grace, you might say, of God.

So, before we see this young man as a write off who didn't “get it,” we must realize how much Jesus loved him. ***He looked at this man and loved him.*** I would like to think, that anyone who encountered the loving gaze of Jesus—even for the shortest amount of time—would never forget it and would ultimately be changed for the better. What became of him? The gospel writer, Mark, leaves the story open-ended. From the perspective of Jesus, there is no closure to this story as there is no closure to your story or mine. Jesus gives every one of us time to reflect, never sees

our answer as the final answer, and leaves room for us to return another day. We could be rich or poor, educated or kindergarten dropouts, sick or healthy, secure or insecure, lonely or surrounded with friends; regardless, the door remains open for a return visit. Leaving behind false securities for God, our ultimate and only security, may take many tries. God is the patient one, slow to anger and rich in mercy.

Once the young rich man left, the disciples told Jesus that what Jesus was asking of this man, and of them, was impossible. Jesus completely agreed with them. Wanting to possess eternal life through our own efforts, is impossible. Saving ourselves is not only impossible, it's also a delusion, a fabrication of our minds. We are saved by God and God alone. The key is to surrender to God's saving love, to live by it, and to pass it on. Even Jesus, as the second person of the most Holy Trinity, did not save himself. He did not raise himself from the grave but was raised by God. Maybe that's why Jesus never saw himself as totally good, for he just knew any goodness within himself came from God, the ultimate source.

So, let's come to this table of thanksgiving, on this Thanksgiving weekend, knowing that God wants us to keep nothing, so He can give us everything.

Fr. Phil