

GO AND COME

Mark 10:17-31

Today, Oscar Romero will be declared a saint by the church he served (at least in a physical sense) up until the time he was shot while leading worship in a hospital chapel. Just a few days before, Romero had “begged, beseeched and ordered” the military to stop its killing. When elevated to leadership in El Salvador, it was believed that Romero would be a quiet, meek servant. Many were surprised by his fiery sermons on behalf of the poor and weak. Even after his assassination, Romero provoked resistance to his memory as the powerful set aside any consideration of being honored, that is, until Brother Francis came along.

We remember that this church leader, rather than choosing a name that would firmly tie him to the traditions of his office, decided on another, one that had never been used previously. He was, as he will admit, heavily influenced by Francis of Assisi who forsook his wealthy heritage in favor of giving his life to the poor. In actuality, he did not so much reject his wealth as to simply give it away to those in need, to the growing consternation of his family which sought to declare him incompetent in order that the wealth of the family be protected from this one who was willing to give all.

Perhaps both the Francis of Assisi and now the Francis of Rome embraced fully the gospel offered today, much to the discomfort of those seeking to preserve the institution of the church, though not always for the benefit of the people. There has been resistance to including Oscar Romero among those to whom people might look and to whom the faithful might pray because the example Romero portrays in response to the gospel threatens many, including those in the church. The prayer by which most learn of the faith of Francis implores God to “make me an instrument of thy peace; where there is hatred, let me sow love, where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith, where there is despair hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness joy.” The prayer continues to outline faithful service: “grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console, to be understood, as to understand, to be loved as to love;” and then concludes with a statement of faith: “for it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.” The truth of discipleship is well explored in this prayer; and, according to the Mark’s gospel, is a truth that challenges a certain rich young man.

The encounter between Jesus and this young man is rich with action and insight. A series of sermons could grow out of these few verses and thus, they deserve our careful attention. As is the case with much of life, we could return again and again to these verses and mine a wealth of understanding of the way of Christ and the will of God. Not all of the nuggets will be explored and admired today, but a few can be lifted before our spiritual eyes for inspection.

Many of us wish to enjoy eternal life. It would seem to some that such a gift is more like an “inheritance” than an accomplishment. That is, eternal life is a relationship to God that is received more than achieved although there is work that we must do to fully receive as is indicated in the story. Eternal life is a gift from God but we must take it up, unwrap it, and enjoy the wonders of it if it is to have meaning for us. Though we must wait to fully understand it, eternal life is present in this life and is a source of the abundance and joy and strength and holy energy that is possible in this life. Francis embraced the eternal as he served and then as he called and equipped others to serve as well. “Lord, make us instruments.”

In his mind, the rich, young man had prepared well to inherit. Unlike some who come into unearned wealth and succeed most in throwing it away through careless living, this young man has created a foundation out of faith that may encourage him to use every inheritance well. The difficulty he encounters, according to Jesus, is that he still lacks one thing. We suspect that the young man is surprised to hear that his accumulation of wealth is not complete for his gains have given him an easy, joyful life free from the threats associated with poverty and work. Perhaps his ears perk up to the challenge of acquiring that one thing he lacks and he is undoubtedly surprised to learn what that one thing---which is actually three things---might be.

First he must go, sell all that he has. Why must he rid himself of all his riches? It is clear that his trust in life is bound up in what he accomplishes, achieves, and accumulates, each serving to signal his blessedness in life. Though he may have inherited his wealth for that is often the case with rich, young rulers, he continues to count on such blessings to gain for him what he declares he most desires.

Then he is commanded to give all that he has realized in this grand liquidation to the poor. One can only imagine the pain that the young man might have experienced as he shared his wealth with those who were considered in his time to be cursed. There is a truth to his activity that we may need to learn in our own sharing of all that we have. Rather than simply giving his clothes, his bed, his house, his jewels to the poor, he must sell and give the proceeds so that the poor can use them as they need. What good will a splendid robe do for one who is hungry unto death? Or a soft bed for another who seeks shelter from the storm? Or golden crowns for one who wishes only to have a garment for warmth? Not only will his wealth become more useable by the poor, it will represent the best of what he has rather than the leftovers, the cast-offs, the waste that are so easily given up because they not longer fit or serve or delight.

Further, he is commanded to come and follow, an invitation made easier because he is no longer preoccupied with retaining his wealth but now set on consoling, understanding, and loving in the words of the prayer of Francis. Concerns that can dominate the attention of the disciple and distract him and her from the being instruments of God’s peace must find their true place in the hierarchy of witness. It will matter less that nature of the bread we provide than the fact that we offer it. Ministry is always about loving more than worrying about how the details of that gift.

Children teach us that as they present to us their marvelous creations of painting, of clay, of cut paper decorations with bright eyes and eager smiles.

The rich young man is offered the opportunity to engage eternal life but, sadly, he passes it up because he has too much to lose. He judges that he cannot afford to lose his life to the gospel offered by Jesus. The teacher reflects to his disciples that this choice, seen in more than financial terms, is difficult, as hard as it is for a camel to go through the eye of needle, a seemingly absurd proposition. Some have downplayed this absurdity by suggesting that the 'eye of the needle' to which Jesus refers is a special entrance to the city used when the great gates are closed for the night. Indeed, a camel would find it difficult to squeeze through such a narrow passage unless of course it was quite young and small or it had all its cargo---its wealth---removed from its back and left beyond the gates to be plundered by those in the countryside. The problem of wealth is greater than this. The 'eye of the needle' is simply the small opening through which a strand might be threaded so that the needle can do its work of creating, or repairing, of connecting. It is a humorous illustration of the problem as one imagines trying to somehow get the camel through that tiny hole in the needle. It is a serious judgment about the devilish quality of wealth.

Are there any who can give up their false sources of trust and come and follow Jesus? Certainly the early call story featuring Simon and Andrew, James and John suggests that it is possible to leave the fortune in fishing and family to follow. Levi can even set aside the income of tax collecting and join the disciples while others set aside all that allows them to accumulate in order to fish for people. Even a small boy can give up his five loaves and two fishes in order to feed 5,000 people and certainly Jesus is willing to give up his life as the prime example of faith.

After undertaking a fine Jesuit education and serving the necessary internship in at the Dolores mission in Boyle Heights, Father Gregory Boyle readied himself to live among the students at Santa Clara University where he would interact regularly with these bright, gifted, even wealthy young people to carry out his call to assist them in gaining a Jesuit education which would surely set them on the road to prosperity and happiness. An encounter with the poor people of Bolivia who revealed a strong sense of trust in God and the willingness to give all that they had for the welfare of another and the desire to follow Jesus, caused him to request that he be returned to the mission. God's call often comes through the pain and poverty, the need and example of others. Father Boyle as the youngest pastor in the diocese was appointed back to the Dolores Mission where he has remained all the years of his service, although the mission itself has seen a number of incarnations. All his work with the young people of an area described as the gang capital of Los Angeles which is seen as the gang capital of the world, has been in this small area of the city, although this work has taken him all over the world to testify to the redeeming quality of compassionate love.

In the beginning, as Boyle and others began to survey the problems that existed in the projects of their East LA area, some---mainly women---began to reach out to the

gang members with but one voice: “You are our sons and our daughters---whether we brought you into the world or not.” These small groups of parishioners would provide food for the hungry young people---sometimes a full turkey dinner at Thanksgiving---as well as a safe place to “kick it” within the rooms and hallways and yard of the church. Not everyone was pleased by the way in which the wealth of the church which was to be found in its buildings was being used up. The tension built to the point that a congregational meeting was called. Two women spoke up simply: “We help gang members at this parish because that is what Jesus would do.” [Boyle, Gregory, *Tattoos on the Heart*, p. 4] No more discussion was needed to launch these mothers and this Father on a program to try to save the children of the community. Out of this response, one quite at odds with that of the rich young man although many rich young men and women have been invited into this response, Homeboy Industries has grown to be the gospel for responding to gangs, a gospel that has been carried throughout the world by Father Boyle and his homies.

How privileged we are to be able to host Father Boyle and perhaps some of his tattooed homies this next Saturday night. In keeping with the early ministry of the Dolores parish, there will be food. But more, there will be an opportunity to hear about the ever-evolving story of Homeboy Industries and those who follow Father Boyle who is that instrument which Francis prayerfully hoped he and we could be. Tickets for both the supper and the talk are still available; invite your friends to come for an evening that will communicate the gospel in ways and with words we might not be able to offer---at least not yet.

Returning to the portion of Mark’s gospel read today, we hear the words that undergird the work of those who can go and give and come and follow. Although Luke placed this truth on the lips of the angel who speak astounding words to Mary the mother of Jesus, Mark offers it from the mouth of Jesus: “With God, all things are possible.” As is Father Boyle and Homeboy Industries, we can become instruments of the peace of the God of all possibilities by trusting in God, by offering ourselves to God’s kingdom, and by following in the way of Jesus, a way of sacrificial service to this kingdom and its kingdom. It’s possible because it is of God. Thanks be to God. Amen.