

Sermon, Proper 23B, October 10, 2021, Jane A. Beebe

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:15-16)

It struck me this week how much all of our lessons this morning—including the Collect—teach us about God’s presence in our lives, and how we are to attain to it. Beginning with this morning’s collect we pray that God’s Grace may precede and follow us. It puts me in mind of the end of Psalm 23: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life...” (Psalm 23:6) It also makes me think of St. Patrick’s Breastplate with its invocation for Christ’s protection: “Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me...”

I love today’s Gospel reading, not because it has a predictable, happy ending, but because it shows us what it is as the heart of discipleship. The conversation Jesus has with the rich man is compelling, so we may miss the significance of the opening phrase. The Gospel begins: “As Jesus was setting out on a journey...” (Mark 10:17) The words almost sound like the classic beginning of a children’s story “Once upon a time...” What is this journey that Jesus is undertaking? We eventually learn that Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem. In the very next chapter we hear that Jesus enters the city on a colt, the people spreading their

cloaks and leafy branches on the road. I think this heightens the significance of Jesus' conversation with the rich man.

I love that the man comes to Jesus on a run, and then kneels before him. (Although this story occurs in Matthew and Luke also, only Mark's Gospel has this detail). This suggests an eagerness, even joy at having found this extraordinary rabbi at last. While many who have approached Jesus in this way have sought healing, this man comes with a question: "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus determines that the man is faithful, that he has followed all the tenets of a devout life; he has lived this way his whole life. Then we learn a wonderful thing. Jesus, having looked at this man, loves him. The Greek word for "look" used here means to look in a sustained, concentrated way, and with concern or love. It also means to see clearly. Isn't this the way a good teacher always sees us: with all our flaws, and with all our potential?

The man has asked an audacious question, a life-changing question. One commentary I read notices the man asks what he must do to *inherit* eternal life. To receive an inheritance we must be related, there must be a familial bond. And so Jesus invites him into a relationship of pure discipleship. In order to follow Jesus, though, he must sell all he has, and give it to the poor. Jesus promises that the man will have treasure in heaven. He is offering more: a chance to remain at Jesus' feet,

to journey with him, and ultimately to know the power of resurrection. Sadly the man is shocked; he goes away grieving “for he had many possessions.”

Perhaps I am overly optimistic. However, I would like to believe that this man’s encounter with Jesus changes him eventually. After all, he must have had the sense that something was missing, or he wouldn’t have sought out Jesus in the first place. Grief for what could have been, for all those things that separate us from our true calling, painful as it is, can have a cleansing, healing effect. It can open our hearts, creating a space for something else to come in. We may experience this as emptiness at first. We may have to endure not knowing how God will come to us to assuage our sense of loss. Jesus will not abandon us in this place if we have humility, if we continue to seek his presence in our lives.

The psalm this morning (that Jesus prays from the cross), and the reading from Job show us the shadow side of our longing for God. I find it comforting that the sense of lack, of abandonment has been felt by our Lord. The psalmist feels forsaken, yet can affirm that God is the Holy One, that they have been entrusted to God since birth, even when they were in the womb. The psalmist prays that God will be near. In a kind of inverse of St. Patrick’s Breastplate Job pours out his anguish:

"If I go forward, he is not there;
or backward, I cannot perceive him;

on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him;
I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.”

We do not hear verses 10-15. They contain these hopeful words: “...He knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I shall come out like gold...” (Job 23:10)
“...He will complete what he appoints for me; and many such things are in his mind.” (Job 23:14)

I know I have spoken of my first experience of receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation before. It remains a powerful turning point in my relationship with God. At one point—and I do not remember if it was before or after the absolution was pronounced by the priest—I became aware in a way I cannot explain, that Jesus was in the room with us: *there*, present, so very real. What took my breath away is that the priest listening to me also acknowledged it.

I do not know what it is that he saw, or heard, or felt. I cannot adequately describe my experience either except to say there was profound love: something so alive that it was aliveness itself. The fact that my priest was a witness, that he affirmed that it was really happening, opened a door for me. This is the gift Jesus offers: *his presence*; this is the reality into which he is inviting the rich man.

I understand the rich man’s grief. It is hard to let go of our possessions, the things that seem to possess us, whether they manifest materially or not.

I don't know about you, but sometimes when I hear, "...For God all things are possible..." (Mark 10:27) what I hope for is some big, transformative miracle. In fact, while what Jesus has told us is true, God's possibilities may come to us slowly, imperceptibly. Yet, if we remain close to God, actually running up to God, kneeling before him, and sincerely asking him what the next best thing we are to do, not worrying if we are first or last, we find that God's presence alone is all we need. St. Teresa of Avila is remembered in our liturgical calendar on October 15. She has given us this simple, yet profound prayer to remind us:

"Let nothing disturb you,
Let nothing frighten you,
All things are passing;
God only is changeless.
Patience gains all things.
Who has God wants nothing.
God alone suffices."—Teresa of Avila