

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

October 15, 2006 – Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Mark 10:17-31

Pr. Robert M. Goldstein

“He went away grieving. . . .”

The Gospel reading this morning tells of a man who walks away from Jesus, grieving. He is neither pompous nor self-deprecating. He asks a serious question and means it. He tells Jesus that from his youth he has kept God’s Ten Commandments. Can you imagine this fellow with such an open heart, such confidence, such honesty, such candor?

Jesus senses his self-clarity, his seriousness. Jesus is so impressed with him that he feels much love toward him. No wonder! What a refreshing change from his mediocre disciples who have such blurry self-definition, such muddled motives, such guile, such sly lust for power! Here is someone head and shoulders above them all!

But it is not to last. For Jesus still does not see simplicity of heart. Jesus said that one thing is lacking to gain eternal life. With open love, Jesus counsels him to sell all that he has and give it to the poor. St. Mark says, “When the young man heard this he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.”

Jesus, moved by the righteous man's grieving departure, declares, "How hard it will be for those with wealth to enter the kingdom of God!"

Now this upsets the disciples. After all, they have always assumed money lubricates the wheels of power grabbing and power peddling. If money can't get one into Jesus' new world order then what can and who can? They have come to the limits of their worldview! It looks quite impossible. But they're not thinking outside of the box, are they?

So what is thinking outside the box? Well, Jesus picks up on the sense of impossibility the disciples dimly comprehend. “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

Interpreting what Jesus' means here becomes treacherous waters indeed. The standard Lutheran position is to parse this text with sin and grace. Commandment-keeping will only give you a sense of sin and teach you of your need for Christ. By Christ's death for your sins, God kindly and graciously imputes by grace to you, a penitent sinner, your partnership in the kingdom.

I can't disagree with that logic or that language. But I do fear it could actually be a thoughtless response among Lutherans, rather than a heartfelt one, lived through, died through, grieved through, struggled through.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer tells of the time when he understood the Beatitudes in such Lutheran boilerplate fashion: the Beatitudes only serve to bring us to need Christ, to live by grace alone. A French acquaintance helped Bonhoeffer realize that, even though we cannot fully live the Beatitudes, we are nevertheless called to try, to die to ourselves, to grieve in the struggle of

living them. Then we discover, even in our grieving, God's gracious power to forgive and to empower –to make the impossible possible.

So also with the Ten Commandments. If there is going to be a Lutheran interpretation, it is not to short-circuit struggling to live them, to live the impossibility of actually living them. And in that struggle, learning to need Christ, learning to grieve our failure, we learn to taste the sweetness of grace.

But when Lutheranism is short-circuited, "cheap grace" Bonhoeffer so aptly called it, people get the maudlin message to not even engage the struggle. Just get the balm of grace alone for your sinful sloppy undefined self. There is no dying. There is no grieving. Is it any wonder that Lutherans are not known for ethical struggle? Is it any surprise that opposition to any major ethical struggle, such as gay rights, comes from the centers of Lutheran pietism?

But Jesus loves this man who comes to him with such self-definition because this man is struggling in keeping the commandments from his youth. Whatever that "keeping" means, it does show that he struggles to live them and didn't wait for some cheap trick to excuse him from the effort.

What am I saying? I am saying you and I are to live by grace from start to finish. But between the start and the finish we are to live an ethical life, which, in turn, will bring times of dying, times of grieving, and times of gracious renewal.

What is the ethical life we are to live? I am not going to be the fool to attempt to define it in words like a fundamentalism. It is existential, as they say. You have to begin or continue living from where you are. I can perhaps counsel you in the complexities of your situation. I can administer the means of grace. But we all have to live our own lives. And if it gets too hard for you, then we all can live your life with you along the way. That's faith community.

Jesus loves this man. That is the key of this text. Jesus loves this man. It is not commandment keeping that is the norm. It is not commandment bashing either. It is certainly not what the disciples thought of: ambition, ticket to fame, self-aggrandizement. It is not grace alone either.

It is not wealth bashing either. Rather those with wealth have yet another layer of complexity in their discipleship to simplicity. Wealth breeds forgetfulness and pride whereas poverty and hunger may more easily teach that only God makes the impossible possible.

Jesus loves this guy because he is earnest. Jesus loves this guy even though he went away grieving. But this is not necessarily the end of his story. It just means he has to think through and feel through his wealth. So grieving is not to be deprecated but to be encouraged. It is part of the process of discipleship, of discovering the simplicity that God has given you daily in your baptism.

Like that lovely man we may have to go away grieving at first, learning how to let go to gain simplicity of faith. It is just a variation of that other Jesus saying: "Seek first your relationship with God and all, ALL those things will be given back to you." Whether you are rich, or learned, or well connected, or have deep family bonds, whatever –these are to be grieved loose from ourselves in order to get them back a hundredfold.

Now there are other types of grieving. We have all grieved over a deep loss. This type of grieving often needs a good cry, a good friend, even a counselor, someone to listen to our grief,

so that we can go through it and then move on in our lives. Then there is a very long grieving that I have seen in people that spreads over years and years. This is morbid grieving and such grieving needs very loving and professional care. But the young man of the gospel need not have those kinds of grieving, but the grief of learning to let go what comes between him and Christ, eternal life.

Jesus loves that man. And Jesus loves you wherever you are in your journey through life. If you have to grieve over something then find someone to share your grief so that you can let it go and rediscover the simplicity of ordinary faith that with God the impossible has been made possible for you too. Amen

St. Francis Lutheran Church
152 Church Street, SF, CA 94114-1111
Phone: (415) 621-2635; Fax: (415) 621-8819
E-mail: StFrancisSF@sbcglobal.net
www.st-francis-lutheran.org