Mark 10:17-26

What will you let go?

October 14, 2018 – The 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Thinking about this passage the other day, my friend said we all want to see and be seen. She didn’t mean “be seen” at an event, where everyone who is important will see you. She meant something more soul satisfying. To be seen as you really are, not as you are expected to be or may sometimes pretend to be - which is not satisfying at all. I immediately thought of the film, Avatar, in which the indigenous people of a rainforest have a particular greeting: “I see you.” This lovely greeting acknowledges you are fully present to each other and open to the relationship that may occur.

When the man runs up to Jesus and actually falls to his knees to ask him question, we can assume he wants to be seen. What happens is shocking and instructive for us, who also want to be seen in the most positive soul-satisfying way.

From the beginning things get off on the wrong foot - or depending on your perspective - the right foot. Is it really possible to inherit eternal life? The question is not as silly as it seems, at least not to the man who has built his life on the assumptions that the greatest things in life come from religious devotion, hard work and money. The inheritance he wonders about is clearly a reward for a good life. Nothing suggests the man is not sincere. He is clearly devoted to religious practice and concerned about the good life.

And Jesus sees him as clearly as he see us. In fact: Jesus loves him. This is one of the most tender moments in all of Mark’s gospel. Nowhere else is Jesus described as loving an individual. He goes along with the man’s confident assumptions of personal goodness, while denying his own. Is there anything at all this man has not accomplished? Apparently not, as he assures Jesus that he has received straight A’s his entire life. One can almost see the glow of satisfaction as he answers Jesus, and feels that deep sense of accomplishment. Is there one more thing I can do?

But remember, Jesus truly loves him. He sees his heart. Jesus knows that he is holding on to the very thing that keeps him from soul-satisfaction. If that weren’t enough of a shock, Jesus asks him to give away his money to help those who have none. The one thing that has brought him security and given him so many privileges in life is the thing that Jesus sees is keeping him from eternal life. Let that go, says Jesus. Let it go, and follow me. It’s shocking to watch him walk away in sadness, clutching what he will not let go.

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There are two mistakes we can make about this story. One that it has to do with money; the other that it has nothing to do with money. Of course, it has to do with money. It's a plain fact of the story. It's also a plain fact that nothing is more worrisome than money and possessions. The more we have, the more comfortable we are and want to be, even while the more complicated things become. The less we have, the more we want simple comfort, and the more complicated things become. Either way, real life is messy, and money is entangled with it.

***[And we know] There are people who use up their entire lives making money so they can enjoy the lives they have entirely used up.*** (Frederick Buechner)

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Money may not be the deepest issue with Jesus and the man; nor with us. The deeper issue is whether he will trust God fully and share his abundance with others. The one thing lacking is that one thing that replaces his faith in God alone. The rich are simply more tempted to cling to their riches than those who have none. The same may be said for all of us. Will we share what we have with others who have none?

When I was 18 years old I went to El Salvador to work with Teen Missions, a service organization whose motto was Get Dirty for God. In the countryside near Lake Illopango, we joined with local people to build a church and community center for their village. There I came to know many Salvadorans, all of whom were poor in resources and very generous in love. They taught me about the Christian virtues of simplicity, vibrant Spirit- filled faith and radical hospitality. I learned Spanish from them. Standing in a cornfield in the hot sun, I had a significant conversion of the heart that led toward my life as a social worker and eventually a pastor.

That same summer Spiro Agnew resigned as Vice President and El Salvador descended into brutal violence against the poor who were demanding better living conditions. I remember Archbishop Oscar Romero who stood up to become a courageous defender of the poor, eventually giving his own life for the sake of the gospel. Before he was murdered while celebrating the Eucharist, he said, “A church that doesn't provoke any crises, a gospel that doesn't unsettle, a word of God that doesn't get under anyone’s skin, a word of God that doesn't touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed —  what gospel is that?”

Today I remember him along with the people of El Salvador and give thanks that he will be known for what he has always been: a saint.

***How can anyone be saved?*** Jesus tells us: With mere mortals, it's impossible, not with God. With God, all things are possible! Therefore, Let go, and let God.

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Now to the One who is able to do far more than we can ask or think or even imagine,

be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.