

## 28<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – B

Franciscans have to pay special attention to today's Gospel since we know that St. Francis did just what Jesus recommended to the man who came to him asking for advice about how to inherit eternal life. He literally gave away all he had to the poor and then followed Jesus, trying to walk in the very footprints Jesus had left.

And the story has a richness about it that serves well the person who comes back to it over a lifetime, always trying to appropriate it better than we have so far.

One of the things Sr. Mary McGlone, a theologian who works with preachers and prayer leaders, points out is that the man's question betrays an attitude that, if he just does the right thing, he will be a shoo-in: "What must I do. Clearly, he thinks the ball is in his court.

Jesus takes him where he is at and structures his response accordingly. "You know the commandments..." Interestingly, he lists those commandments which have to do with the moral life. Those are important starting points. The man has those covered, and has been observing them from his youth.

But then, things get interesting. Then, Jesus "looked on him and loved him." That love moved Jesus to invite the man to embrace the fullness of the first commandments, the ones that have to do with devotion and not just obedience: to love God with such abandon that he would hold nothing back and then rely on God's providence like Jesus did.

That's how St. Francis interpreted it anyway, and responded accordingly. That was too tall an order. Abandon everything? That's sounded reckless. What about the prudence highlighted

in today's first reading? "I prayed and prudence was given me, I pleaded and wisdom came to me." How could someone achieve wisdom by practicing such abandon? He missed the part that explains genuine wisdom costs everything one possesses.

Jesus invited the wealthy man to live into wisdom's approach to life, an approach that appreciates possessions as a means to communion. The man went away sad because he couldn't see his way through to distributing all he had to the poor. That sounded to him like too much to ask.

Jesus was sad, too. The conversation had come so far, but that last step had been too much. And yet, it was the one that counted the most.

One of the things I appreciate most about the life of St. Francis is that he was so open and transparent to his brothers. His interior life was there for all to see. As he approached his death, which he could see coming from a long way off, he gave expression to his regrets. He was sorry for treating "brother Ass" (his body) so roughly. But he never regretting anything that to do with trusting in God's providence too much. He never thought he had entered into a bad deal. God had come through and compensated him for the devotion and abandonment to God that Francis practiced.

Francis had really let go of all that he had, had made that space available to God to fill, and God had done so in abundance.

Even though I have publicly made a vow to follow Francis' example, I recognize that I have a long way to go before I make that a reality for me. The best I have been able to do is to claim that as a fundamental creative tension for me so that I always

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have a spur that keeps me moving forward in doing something about what keeps me from greater love of God. Especially when I become dissatisfied—with my prayer life, with the Church, with how others live out their Christian vocation, with the injustice in the world—I have a surefire method of getting back into positive space.

How am I responding to the poor? What claim do they have on my time, talent and treasure? Jesus presents “give what you have to the poor” as an important precondition for the sort of total trust in God that really gives God room to act.

That total trust is part two. Without part one, divesting ourselves of whatever it is that we are placing our trust in, or as St Ignatius taught, being indifferent to it, God will never be able to get through to us. It really is one or the other.

We hear this story today, not to critique the would-be follower, but to look at our own lives in its light. The story calls for an evaluation of what we own, what we are in control of, from our material goods to our independence, to how we use our time. Does it free us to live and give or does it tie us down and make us frightened of loss?

Will the investment required to receive eternal life seem like too high a price to pay and lead us to settle for obedience to the Law and pass on the freedom and fullness of life which comes from following the Lord in the Spirit the Lord provides?

Like the wealthy man, we have received an inheritance. It's not about genetics and biology, or status and goods, although they are included. Our most basic inheritance is the desire for communion with God.

Eternal life is a birthright, an inheritance no one can earn. The wealthy man had forgotten that most fundamental reality and his forgetting had led him only into dissatisfaction. A better question would have been, "What must we do to be open to our inheritance?" The short answer seems to be, "First of all, make room for it. Then, get ready, 'cause it will come in abundance."