

We lose so much of the message when we take a reading like today's Gospel and take it literally and at face value. I hope that no one here believes that in order to have eternal life we have to sell everything, give the proceeds to the poor and become a disciple of Jesus. Because that's not the message we should be hearing. Even St. Francis, who's feast day we celebrated last Sunday did not sell everything HE had and gave it to the poor, he sold everything his FATHER had and gave the proceeds to the church. Needless to say, Francis's father quickly disabused his son with regard to the appropriateness of these actions and Francis had to buy everything back.

Now Francis had what we might charitably call a misspent youth and young adulthood. He was entitled, arrogant, and lazy. He was a party boy, staying out all night and sleeping during the day. He was selfish and self-obsorbed. Then one night in a dream, God touched him in such a way that Francis fully realized that he was completely out of step with what God wants from us. From that moment on, with a few false starts, Francis stopped focusing on himself and began focusing on what God wants and how to best serve his neighbor and he then devoted his life to those ends. THAT's much of the message we should be hearing from Mark.

If our concern is on how we can achieve salvation or on how we can obtain security or how we can inherit anything then we are on a fool's errand. In our Gospel message last week, we heard Jesus say to his disciples that we receive the Kingdom of God when we are utterly and completely dependent on God, much as a child is completely dependent upon his or her parents. [This was much easier for me as a five year old than as a 15 year old when I had greater autonomy and chafed at the dependence I had upon my parents. Much more difficult for me is giving up any kind of control, or more accurately the perception of control, over the course of events in my life. Intellectually I know that control is an illusion but that doesn't stop me from trying to exercise it. Maybe it is the same way for you.

Jesus is trying to point this out to the observant Jewish man who has faithfully kept the commandments regarding his fellow human beings since childhood. Possessions have a way of possessing us rather than the other way around. They contribute to the notion that we can rely on ourselves rather than on God. They let us believe that we are in control. They can reassure us that we are blessed and deserving. And indeed, we are

blessed; however, our Gospel reading does not support a “prosperity Gospel” interpretation.

In Jesus’ time, it was widely understood that anyone who had wealth was favored by God, and that the wealth was a deserved reward.

Likewise, if one was poor, it too was a deserved outcome. Oh sure, there are exceptions, like that which occurs in our Job reading, but they are exceptions and not the rule. We’re not so different in our own day, especially with regard to the poor - poverty is the natural result of poor decisions, right? We tend to forget about systemic racism, lack of educational opportunities, inability to travel for work, and lack of other benefits that accrue to those of us who had the good fortune to be born into a family of means.

Did you notice that when Jesus quoted some of the commandments he added one? You shall not defraud. Some wealth is the result of fraud, then as it is now, especially if you don’t get caught - just ask Volkswagen. The entire witness of Mark’s Gospel is that God is concerned about economic justice. The first century world view was that there was a finite number of resources, so if one had more than one needed, it was taken from someone else and left them in want. Such behavior does not

demonstrate love of neighbor. In the first century, there was no understanding of compounding interest, of trickle down economics or of a rising tide lifting all boats in terms of prosperity.

In some respects, however, the first century view is correct that we have finite resources: think petroleum. When it runs out - as it is likely to run within a matter of decades - what will we do? Never mind fueling our vehicles, can we make do without all the products made with plastics? And in our search for more petroleum products, what cost do we impose upon the environment and upon indigenous cultures? As part of the developed world, we use far more than our share of the world's resources - and these resources are indeed finite. After petroleum, fresh water is expected to be the next resource nations will be willing to go to war over. These will no doubtedly become the pressing concerns of the 21st Century, and our first century Savior leaves no doubt on how God would want us to resolve these issues. The question will boil down to where our concern will be: with our wants and desires and our own self-interests or with the needs of others. Jesus understands that in the Kingdom of God the needs of others will always prevail.

So go out and sell all you possess and give the proceeds to the poor?

No. This is an impulsive response that will not ultimately serve God's purposes. Far better stewardship of our individual resources happens when charities are thoughtfully researched ensuring the best bang for the buck in seeking economic justice. Forethought and planning tends to produce better and more predictable outcomes.

Work on our attitude toward wealth and our possessions? Yes! Let us guard against a false sense of relying on our own abilities and resources in lieu of relying on God. Let us hold our possessions lightly, recognizing that things give us very little in return - rather it is in fostering our relationships -with God and with our neighbor - that meaning and fulfillment take shape. Life in God's Kingdom is about caring and sharing and when we care more about others, when we share without regard for ourselves we find us paradoxically rewarded, metaphorically gaining 100 times more than what we have sacrificed.

Today's reading is meant not just for individual's, it is also meant for the church. In Mark's Gospel, the unnamed man is the only person specifically mentioned as having had Jesus love him. The man has done all the right things since childhood. Jesus asks him to step forward in faith

and step up his commitment. His attachment to his things, no doubt things that provided comfort, pleasure and security, that represented many happy memories, gave him pause. To give them up caused him grief to even think about it.

And so it is with us. I hope everyone here finds a measure of comfort and security in this place, I hope there are many happy memories. I also hope that as our context and circumstances change around us, we do not let our comfort and security or our happy memories become a stumbling block for us as we try to step forward in faith, as we try to step up our commitment to God and our neighbor. I hope we can each pray in all sincerity as we seek to shape our future, “not what we want, Lord, but what YOU want.” I hope that as we engage the challenges that lie before us, our orientation is toward God and toward our service to our neighbors and not on what we want in order to just survive. I hope that we can let go of our fears and be completely dependent upon God for an outcome that serves the greater church and the world, and in so doing we too will enjoy a paradox: that we also are served. May the next three weeks be part of the further unfolding of the Kingdom of God.

AMEN.