

TEACHER, WHAT MUST I DO?
Rev. Gary Magarrell October 18, 2009

Today our Gospel reading from Mark's Gospel is one of the most compelling stories of the bible and also one of the best known. For that reason we often think we have gleaned all there is from the incident and may even feel tired of hearing it again.

I remember hearing a sermon last year on the prodigal son. As much as I love this story, I wondered what could be said that I had not heard or read sometime in the past. However, I sat there mesmerized by the fresh viewpoint shared which caused me to look again at the richness of this tale told by Jesus the great storyteller.

So here we have the tale of the rich young aristocratic man. Let us look at the setting where this man met Jesus to understand its context.

Jesus had just completed a very busy day. The Pharisees had challenged Jesus over divorce and remarriage. When they left and the disciples were trying to wind up things for the day, they became irritated by all the men and women who were flocking to Jesus with their children so that he might touch and bless them. Mark uses the word indignant to describe Jesus' reaction to his disciples trying to shoo away all the kids and their parents so Jesus could rest.

You can well imagine that the disciples, seeing Jesus so annoyed, looked at one another as if to say – here comes another lecture. Jesus requested they not stop the children. Seizing this as a teaching moment for the disciples, Jesus indicated the need for all to receive the kingdom of God as a child if they wished to enter into the kingdom of God. We all know that look of wonder as a child sees something new or anticipates Christmas or opening a gift. That sense of wonder must never be forgotten by a Christian – we must never become so blasé that we lose it all by our neglect or by becoming jaded to the wonder of God's love. Jesus urges us to never lose our capacity to wonder.

Back to our biblical story: finally, everyone has gone on their way and Jesus sets out on his next journey. William Barclay in his commentary on this passage says we should note how the man came up to Jesus and how Jesus met him. The young man was running. He flung himself down at Jesus' feet. Think about it, this must have been some sight to see this very well dressed aristocratic young man throwing himself at the feet of this penniless prophet from Nazareth.

The young man gets right to the point before Jesus walks on or the disciples could stop him. "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life" was his burning and very earnest question. Were you surprised by Jesus' rather quick answer that he shot back at the young man? In our modern vernacular, we would translate Jesus' answer as "No flattery! Don't call me good! Keep the word good for God!" It almost sounds like Jesus was trying to pour ice water on the young man's enthusiasm.

We can sense that the young man was in a moment of overflowing emotion and was fascinated to finally meet Jesus and speak with him. Undoubtedly he had heard for some time of Jesus and was eager to see him for himself. Jesus urges that he stop and calm down and think about what he was asking in his question as to how to inherit eternal life. You need to be calm to understand the cost to you of what you ask. This is a weighty question and you need to be rational to hear my reply.

Also, Jesus was saying in effect that you can not become a Christian by some sentimental attachment to him. “You must look beyond me at God” Jesus states. There is an interesting lesson here. Our devotion must be to God not the preacher or the messenger. All of us as preachers, teachers, witnesses etc. need to ensure we point not to ourselves but to God as we seek to bring others to Christ.

One could argue that never did any story so lay down the essential Christian truth which is that respectability is not enough in life. Jesus reminded the young man about the commandments given of God. “I follow them all” the young man quickly replied. In essence the young man was saying as we so often say “In all my life I never did anyone any harm.” However, Jesus’ question to us as to the young man takes a different approach: “What good have you done? What good have you done?”

Jesus’ question to the young aristocrat was very specific and required an answer. You and I as we hear this question of Jesus as to what good have you done, assume this is a valid question to pose to someone who is rich. What have you done with the blessings you possess? What we forget is that as wealth goes, all of us here today are in the top 10% of people in the world who have wealth. We do have possessions and good things in life. So Jesus is also talking to us today in asking this question.

So what really was Jesus’ question to the young man? Here it is in essence. With all your possessions, with all your wealth, with all you **could** give away, what positive good have you done to others? How much have you gone out of your way to help and comfort and strengthen others as you might have done?

There was no doubt in Jesus’ mind we suspect that he knew this was an earnest fine young man. He was decent, respectful of others and eager to do the right thing. It sounds here as if Jesus was saying “respectability, on the whole, does not require doing things; however, Christianity consists of doing things.” This is where the young man like so many of us fall down.

This concept that Christianity consists of doing things is interesting. We want to note that this statement is not asking for busyness for the sake of activity itself. Rather, it shows us again that the Christian is not to be the one to sit back and let it all pass before him or her. The Christian moves out into the stream of life and lives his or her faith in the jostle, hustle and bustle of life. The Christian is to affect history not to be a victim of events.

Jesus looks at the young man, sees his eager and sincere desire to know what he should do, and Jesus places this challenge to him. “Get out of this moral respectability. Stop

looking at goodness as consisting in not doing things. Take yourself and all you have, and spend everything on others. Then you will find true happiness in time and in eternity.”

What a challenge! Could this young man ever learn to be positively and sacrificially generous? Could we?

It is respectable and proper to never take something away from anyone. However, the Christian act is to give to someone. It is a positive move, one which involves risk.

The young man in the story could not do as Jesus suggested. He had great possessions and he had never thought nor intended to give them away. He was indeed a good man but he could not compel himself to be positively and sacrificially generous. Is the question: How much do you want real Christianity? Do you want it enough to give away your possessions which stand between you and real faith? The answer was: “I want it, but not as much as that.”

Is that not often our sickness? We all want goodness, but so few of us want it enough to pay the price which involves hard work and changing our way of operating. Jesus urges us to see what separates us from doing what we need to be about? What is stopping us from emerging ourselves in good works? What stops us from being an agent for good?

Jesus was noting with this young man that his wealth stopped him from experiencing fullness of life. Do we not assume that wealth can help us have a great life? Yet here was Jesus, not saying there was anything wrong with wealth, but commenting on the negative affect this wealth had on the young man’s capacity to experience true fullness of life.

The biblical text uses these words about Jesus in regards to the young man. “And Jesus looking upon him loved him.” Jesus felt for him and saw the fine person he was and the good he could do if only he could move beyond the wealth and privilege he had been given.

Think about that phrase “And Jesus looking upon him loved him.” There are so many things in that look Jesus gave to that young man and to us:

1. There was appeal to love. Jesus was not angry with the young man. He loved him too much for that. It was not a look of anger but the appeal of love.
2. There was a challenge the view of chivalry. It was a look which sought to pull men and women out of their comfortable, settled, respectable life into the adventure of being a real Christian.
3. It was also the look of grief. This grief was seeing a man deliberately choose not to be what he might have been. More than that, the young man had it in him to be a fine Christian and turned away.

This passage speaks to the adventure which is the Christian life and our Lord who calls us to a new way of living.

Jesus in his ministry demonstrated the act of true giving. The disciples were amazed at his energy and his willingness to listen and respond. They noticed that Jesus acted with people who were in contact with him as one who could not miss this encounter and made it an encounter for good. Jesus was present in the moment and seized the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of others.

Faith is an adventure and adventure calls forth action. Though Jesus often went alone to pray in quiet and refreshed himself in this way, Jesus allowed people to be around him and to seek his time, energy and healing presence.

Be not afraid to venture forth. Try it as a child tries so hard when it learns to walk. Get up again and again, never give up and in time you will walk in the faith.

There is a great book which uses the story of Peter and the disciples out in the boat in a great storm. They were all afraid of drowning. In the mist they saw Jesus walking toward them. Peter, in his joy, sought to meet Jesus. Jesus invited him to come and join him. What would you do with that invitation? This book by a man named Ortby is titled: *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*.

He is saying by this title what Jesus was saying to the rich young man. If you want to find eternal life, you have to go bravely forward headfirst into life among the people of God whom God created.

This is God's clear call to each of us. Step out of the boat and try new ways of doing things. Give all you have which holds you back from life away to others and you will discover life.

Teacher, what must I do? Put off the things that hold you back and come follow me.