



WHAT MUST I DO? WHAT MIGHT BE THE “ONE THING MISSING” IN MY SPIRITUAL WALK? IS BEING A “GOOD PERSON” NOT ENOUGH?

I will get to the above questions that flow from today’s Gospel later in my column. But first, I want to focus on our second reading which will lead into my reflections on the Gospel. In today’s second reading, we heard the following powerful words:

Brothers and sisters, the Word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart. No creature is concealed from him, but everything is naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must render an account. (Hebrews 4:12-13)

The author of Hebrews is telling us:

- God’s Word is “*living and effective.*” It is a fact of history that whenever men and women opened their heart to God’s Word, their lives were changed.
- God’s Word is “*sharper than a two-edged sword, penetrating between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart.*” The dual capability of the Word of God is that it *reveals God* to the believer and, at the same time, *reveals the believer* to God and to him/herself. The Word of God tests a person’s earthly life and his spiritual existence. The Word of God scrutinizes our *desires* and *intentions*.
- “*No creature is concealed from him, but everything is naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must render an account.*” We may be able to hide our true self from others or from ourselves, but we cannot hide from God. Before God we are totally naked and exposed. In the Garden of Paradise, Adam and Eve, after they had sinned, created the first “cover-up story.” They put on fig leaves to cover up their nakedness. Before they sinned, they were naked and unashamed. There is no hiding from God’s Word. It sees right into our hearts. It may be scary but also very freeing to stand before God naked and unafraid.

God’s Word unveiled the rich young man’s mask

In our Gospel story today, we have a concrete example of God’s Word penetrating the soul of a rich young man and unmasking him for who he truly is.

The rich young man was, in a certain sense, a good man. He seemed to be quite religious. After all, he kept all of

the commandments. And now he wants to go a step further. “Lord, there must be something else. What else must I do to attain eternal life?” Who wouldn’t be happy with such a sincere young man?

Jesus was not necessarily unhappy with him. But when asked the question, “what else do I need to do?” Jesus gave an answer that the young man was not ready to receive. But before Jesus delivered his zinger “to go sell your possessions,” he first “*looked at him with love.*” Commenting on the words “*Jesus looked at him with love,*” William Barclay writes: “There were many things in that look of Jesus.”

- *There was the appeal of love. Jesus was not angry with him. He loved him too much for that. It was not the look of anger but the appeal of love.*
- *There was the challenge to moral courage. It was a look which sought to pull the man out of his comfortable, respectable, settled life into the adventure of being a real Christian.*
- *It was the look of grief. And that grief was the sorest grief of all—the grief of seeing a man deliberately choose not to be what he might have been and had it in him to be.*

The young man and everyone else in the crowd would have been shocked at Jesus’ invitation to “*go sell all your possessions.*” Their religious formation would have taught them that material wealth was a sign of God’s favor. No one in those days would have looked upon material wealth as an *obstacle* to a closer walk with God.

Jesus who could read hearts, knew that the young man, despite his *apparent* goodness, loved the security of his outer wealth *more than* he loved God. He came to Jesus believing that God was number one in his life. He departed with the knowledge that his *love* of material things was the real god in his life. He came to Jesus *very excited* about meeting him and hearing what wisdom he could impart to him. He departed with his head down. One wonders what he was thinking or feeling as he walked away. Was he feeling disappointed with himself, or disillusioned with Jesus? We may wonder what happened to the young man. Did he go back to practicing a religion that left him feeling comfortable but unchallenged?

Why did Jesus ask so much of the rich young man?

As we observe the encounter between Jesus and the rich young man, we may have many thoughts, feelings and reactions. For example:

Why would Jesus ask so much so early? Why not

gradually bring the rich young man to a greater commitment? Why go for the jugular at their first encounter?

- How do you and I feel about Jesus' request? Does it scare you? Is it not reason enough to keep Jesus at a distance? After all, if we get too serious about Jesus, who knows what he might ask of us.
- How would we respond to Jesus' invitation to "sell all our possessions"?

Some thoughts on the above questions. *First*, we need to always remember that "God's ways are not our ways, nor his thoughts our thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8). A big piece of faith is believing or trusting that "God knows best." We can question his ways and wonder about them but in the end, we have to try to seek to embrace his ways even though we do not understand them. We have to believe that Jesus, in his wisdom, said what was best for that young man at the time. Sometimes we need *radical* surgery to heal some bad disease. Anything else would simply not do the job. In the rich young man's case, it seems that he needed radical surgery to liberate himself from his deep attachment to his material wealth.

Second, Jesus, who could read hearts, knew exactly what was the "one thing missing" in the young man's devotion to God. He had become too *attached* to his wealth. His possessions had become his god. His possessions possessed him. His outer wealth had obviously become an obstacle to his inner health. He thought he could be religious while hoarding lots of riches. If he had come to realize that God blessed him with wealth so that he could bless others, it is possible that Jesus would not have demanded so much of him. His *attachment* to his wealth had become a huge obstacle to his relationship with God.

Third, while the vast majority of us may not be ready to sell *all* our possessions and give our money to the poor, hopefully, we are becoming more and more generous with the material blessings we have. Hopefully, we are seeing that we are only *stewards* and not owners of what we have, and that our call is to be good, responsible and generous stewards of all God has given us. As our second reading today reminds us, one day we will have to render an account of stewardship.

Fourth, scholars would *not* say that what Jesus asked of the rich young man is what he expects of all of us. The "one thing missing" in our lives may not be attachment to our possessions but something else. The "one thing missing" in our lives may be our attachment to our grievances that we hold onto like precious jewels. Or the "one thing missing" might be lack of time for honest prayer before God. We may have created such a busy lifestyle for ourselves that we have very little time for real

prayer. For example, there are 96 fifteen-minute periods in everyday. How many of us give God our *total* attention for even *one* fifteen-minute period? Can we say God is important to us while neglecting to be totally present to him for *one* fifteen-minute period each day?

Finally, is being a "good person" all that God asks of us? Seemingly not. The rich young man was a good person and that was not enough. Jesus asked for more. Jesus is always raising the bar on us. He will never allow us to be smug or complacent about our spiritual lives. Yet this is a huge danger for all of us. It takes courage for us to look Jesus in the eye and ask: Master, what is the "one thing missing" in my relationship with you? So it is *not* enough to be a "good person." We must strive to have an active, dynamic relationship with Jesus which allows us to be always brought to the next level.

Wisdom

Today's readings are also often looked upon as a contrast between wisdom and foolishness. In our beautiful first reading, the author is praying for the gift of wisdom:

*I prayed...and the spirit of wisdom came to me.
I preferred her to scepter and throne,
and deemed riches nothing in comparison with her,
because all gold, in view of her, is little sand,
and before her, silver is to be accounted mud...
Beyond health...I loved her...*

Wisdom 7:7-11

In this reading, the author is saying that he prefers Lady Wisdom to material riches, to health, to beauty, to everything that men and women normally cherish. In comparison to Lady Wisdom, all riches are of little value.

Our Gospel today is about a rich young man who lacked true wisdom. In his foolishness, he chose *earthly* wealth to heavenly wealth.

Have a blessed week,

Fr. Aaron