HOMILY FOR THE 28TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – B

I imagine there was a little grumbling among the disciples when they heard Jesus tell the rich man that if he wanted to make it to heaven he would have to go back home, sell what he had, give it to the poor and then come follow him. I mean the rich man obviously thought a lot of Jesus. He had run up to him and knelt before him – not something that rich men were in the habit of doing. Usually they had people coming and kneeling before them. So clearly this rich man was willing to place himself in Jesus’ service. And they definitely could have used his financial support. A well-funded ministry would have gained Jesus and his followers a bit more respect – not to mention better food, drink and clothing. So I wouldn’t be surprised if when Jesus told the rich man that wealth wasn’t a good thing for him, someone among his band of followers had muttered under his breath something like Tevye did to a similar assertion in Fiddler on the Roof, “May the Lord smite me with it and may I never recover.”

So why in the world would Jesus tell this man to give all his wealth away before joining up with them? Well, Mark tells us, doesn’t he? Before Jesus told the rich man what he would have to do to come into the life of heaven, he looked at him with love. Because he loved him, Jesus wanted this man to live into the dream of heaven that God had placed within his heart, more than he wanted his money. Because he loved him, Jesus wanted this man to let go of the thing that was causing his restlessness, the thing that was weighing him down and keeping him from soaring into the heavenly life.

But though Jesus looked at the rich man with love, it seems that this wasn’t enough for him -- at least not immediately. And it isn’t hard to understand why. Along with most of his people, this man had been led to believe that wealth was a sign of God’s favor. And now Jesus was telling him to give it all away. This word must have pierced the rich man to his very depths, something the writer of Hebrews says the word of God still always do. And so the rich man went away wounded, deeply saddened, because he just wasn’t prepared to do what Jesus said he would have to do if he was to have his dream of entering into the heavenly life fulfilled.

No doubt Jesus too was saddened by this. As he watched the man walk away like one weighed down by a heavy burden, he turned to his disciples and said, “How hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. Why, it’s as hard as it would be for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle.” And Peter responded, “Well, if one whose been so blessed by God is going to have that tough a time coming into the heavenly life, then I’ve got no chance at all.” And Jesus said, “You’re right. You definitely don’t have what it takes to make it to heaven.” And that would have been terrible indeed, if he hadn’t quickly added the words, “But God does. With God, anything is possible, so getting to heaven is definitely doable.” And this is the very same word that Jesus speaks to each of us this evening.

This evening Jesus bids each one of us to do what he asked of the rich man. By this I don’t mean that all of us have to sell everything we have, give it to the poor, and become missionaries. After all, money may not be the thing we won’t let go of to receive what only God can give. I mean, I can imagine a poor person coming up to Jesus after the rich man and saying, “I’m willing to give up all my possessions and follow you into the heavenly life.” And Jesus responding, “Oh, that won’t be necessary, my friend. But if you want to come into the life of heaven, you are going to have to let go of your hatred of the Samaritans.”

You see there are many reasons for the restlessness that comes from our not being where we really want to be, and clinging to wealth is only one of them. In his book Against an Infinite Horizon, Ronald Rohlheiser tells of a man who came up to him after one of his retreat talks and said: For most of my life, and especially for the past twenty years, I’ve been too restless to really live my own life. I have never
really accepted what I am – a forty-five-year-old man, working in a grocery store in a small town, married to a good woman, but one who I know will never fulfill my deepest desires for intimacy. And I’m aware that despite all my day-dreaming . . . I’m not going anywhere. I will never fulfill my dreams, I will only be here, as I am now, in this small town, in this particular marriage, with these people, in this body, for the rest of my life. . . But what is sad in all this is that, from every indication, I should be having a good life. I am lucky really. I am healthy, loved, secure, in a good marriage, living in a country of peace and plenty. Yet, inside myself I am so restless that I never enjoy my own life and my wife and my kids and my job and the place where I live. I’m always in some other place inside myself, yearning for something more.

Now the fact that this man was on this retreat meant that he sensed at some level that the answer to his restlessness had something to do with God. And the truth of the matter is that in one way or another it always does. Since we are made to share in the life of heaven, nothing less than this will satisfy us over the long haul. The trouble is that often the world plants in us the notion that the first step toward overcoming restlessness is getting something, when the truth is that the first step toward overcoming restlessness is letting something go. For as long as we are clinging to something else too tightly, we cannot grab hold of the hand that God is reaching out to us, to pull us up out of that restlessness and into the life for which we are made.

An image that came to me this week when reflecting on today’s Gospel and how we come to the heavenly life was that of a hot air balloon – maybe because I just saw one the other day. It was soaring way up high. Well, I can imagine someone coming to the pilot of that hot air balloon and saying, “Ever since I saw you soaring up there, I’ve had such a great longing to do this. It’s all I can think of. Will you take me up with you?” And the pilot responds, “Yes. But if you are going to fly with me you will have to leave your backpack here.” “But everything I own is in that backpack.” the man replies. “I understand,” the pilot says, “but it’s too heavy. We won’t be able to lift off and soar up high until you let go of it.”

So it is with soaring into the heavenly life. No matter how much we yearn for it, the only way it can happen is if we let go of whatever it is that is weighing us down or holding us back. So Jesus says to the rich man, “If you want me to bring you into the life of heaven, then you’re going to have to leave your riches behind.”

But for some of us, even some with many possessions, our wealth is not the thing that is keeping us from entering the heavenly life. For us, it is something else. And I suspect that most of us know what that something else is. But if we don’t, there will undoubtedly come a time when Jesus will speak to us in some way. To one he will say, “If you want me to lead you to your life’s fulfillment, then you’re going to have let go of your self-pity.” To another, “You must let go of your pride.” And to another, “You must let go of your craving for attention.” And to another, “You must let go of your dependency on food, drink, and other diversions.” And to another, “You must let go of clinging so tightly to your family.” And to yet another he will say, “You must let go of your unwillingness to forgive.”

Now like the rich man in the gospel, we may have to hear this more than once. But if like the disciples in the gospel, we stick with Jesus long enough, we will hear that word that will give us the courage to let go of whatever it is that we are clinging to too tightly, -- we will hear that word, “With God all things are possible.”

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