

The young man asks Jesus in this morning's Gospel reading a very tough question that I think we all wrestle with at some point: "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

It's worth noting that Jesus' response to the young man's inquiry includes a cursory review of the 10 commandments. Of interest to me is what Jesus includes in this list of commandments, but more specifically, what he doesn't.

Jesus clearly holds the 10 Commandments in very high regard and understands them to be fundamental building blocks of right relationship with God and neighbor. Jesus took them seriously, and expected that this man would, too.

Since the young man was a keeper of the commandments, he would know which of the commandments Jesus didn't mention. It would be a glaring omission on Jesus' part, and as such, they would stand out in this young man's mind and grab his attention.

The young man and others who were listening to this discussion would know that Jesus intentionally leaves out the half of the commandments to make a point, most of which address one's relationship with God, and all of which deal with one's private spirituality. The two most obvious omissions are: (1) you will have no other gods before me; and (2) you shall not make idols and worship them.

The selective mention of the commandments jars his listeners to realize that we cannot earn eternal life through any merit of our own. Jesus is pointing the man, and us, to consider instead the priorities of our hearts.

"Jesus," he says, "I've been faithful and have kept the commandments since I was a boy."

And what is Jesus' response? He looks at the man, he really looks at him – he **sees** the man for all that he is and all he has become, and **loves** him.

This man is rich, and his life is defined by his wealth. Jesus sees not only this man's self-understanding, but Jesus also sees him with the eyes of God. The

disconnect between the two inspires Jesus to be filled with compassion for him.

We understand and value ourselves different than Jesus does as well. Perhaps some of us define our identity by our material success or by our intellect or by our social activism or by our social connections or by our political affiliation. We all have our self-value wrapped up in something other than our relationship with God, and Jesus sees that. He **sees** us as we are. And by the grace of God, we are **loved** as we are.

Those of us of privilege have so much to be grateful for: we are assured retirement income from social security, pension plans and 401ks; we have relatively easy access to quality medical care; we proudly display diplomas from accredited secondary and graduate schools which hang on the walls of our houses; we are dressed in clean clothes in good repair; our kids own several pairs of shoes that fit!, (and when they don't, we don't really think twice about buying another pair); we eat whatever we want, as much as we want, whenever we want; we are cool in the summer and warm in the winter; those of us in this room who want employment can find employment and we don't have to worry about how we're going to get from our homes to our jobs and back again. Our problems are all first world problems.

But our privilege goes deeper than that. We are fortunate enough to have so much that we can simply take for granted: most of us here are of the privileged race, speak with the privileged speech patterns, inhabit the privileged body shape, exhibit the privileged sexual orientation, were born in the privileged birth country, and adhere to the privileged faith tradition. We get to enjoy these privileges as we go about our day to day lives. And while many of us have not *intentionally* used our privilege in ways that diminish the rights and freedoms of others, we have benefitted in countless overt and subtle ways by our privilege nonetheless.

God calls us beyond the ranks of our privilege to turn the status quo upside down. We are the Firsts. And our culture reinforces in countless ways that that is the place we want to be – on top, number one. But Jesus says no. When we Firsts let the Lasts take our place in line ... that's when we're getting this faith thing right. And that's at the heart of what Jesus is saying here.

“You lack one thing.” Jesus doesn’t angrily dress the man down because he hasn’t kept his priorities straight ~ the rich man loves his wealth, his power, his prestige too much to be willing to give it up. He doesn’t condemn the man for loving earthly things more than divine things. He simply and straightforwardly says ~ by speaking Truth in love ~ that the man should give up that which has usurped God’s place in his life.

The man walks away, we are told, grieving.

He grieves because he is faced with having to relinquish his power. To live fully as a child of God, Jesus tells him, he must surrender not just his financial security and material assets, but his self-determination ... his place in society, which of course is tied up in his pride and self-understanding. He must relinquish control.

Control is such a human thing to want. Being in control makes you *feel* like you know your place, you know your value, you know who you are. Right? But the thing about control is that it’s not real ~ it’s an illusion that is another privilege of the Firsts. We want to believe that when we’re in control, we’ll have no more worries, we’ll hunger for nothing, and that we’ll *have it all* in the palm of our hand. But that’s not how it works. None of us truly are in control.

We see it right here with the rich young man: he has just run up to Jesus and knelt before him – the actions of a man who is clearly spiritually hungry and aching for that *something* that he knows is missing in his life, despite the fact that he has everything a man of his day could ever possibly want. Despite his best efforts to check off the each of the 10 commandments on his daily checklist while amassing a fortune and securing his comfort in old age, he is still not in control of his destiny.

The prospect of leaving all that behind grieves him deeply; the one who ran eagerly to Jesus now turns his back and walks away, so far unwilling to relinquish “living the good life” so that he can live *THE good, everlasting Life*.

What would it look like for us to give up control of that which we’ve chosen to define us? How might our relationship with God shift or change if we handed over that which is most precious to us? How do we let the Lasts move up in line?

It isn't possible to give up our power and privilege that we inherently possess just by existing ~ we'll still be upper-middle class, we'll still be white, we'll still be educated and so forth. Let me be clear - none of those are bad things, to be sure!

But we can choose to leverage that inherent power and privilege to the glory of God and to the benefit of others ~ thereby shifting the interpersonal and institutional biases that marginalize those different from ourselves. We can choose to *intentionally* and *deliberately* seek Christ in all persons and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves. We can choose to set aside the idols of wealth, control, partisanship, race, sex and all the others to unite as the Body of Christ to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. We can choose to work together to comfort and protect the widow and the orphan and all who endure hardship, degradation and violence ... just like Jesus. We can choose to use our voices to speak out for the voiceless; we can choose to advocate for the marginalized; and we can choose to redistribute our power and wealth to those who have been or continue to be deprived ... just like Jesus. We can choose not to absorb ourselves in our first world problems, but rather focus first on the problems of the world.

Jesus **sees** us, just like he saw the rich man. Jesus **loves** us, just like he loved the rich man. And Jesus calls us, just like he called the rich man, to dig deeper, to sacrifice whatever it is that we have withheld from God and give our entire selves to his service.