

Our gospel reading this morning opens with a contextual reminder: Jesus is going on his way. Throughout this challenging passage we are to keep this little sticky note in mind: Jesus is going on his way. To a party? To have supper with civic leaders? To astound folks with miracles? No, he is on his way to Jerusalem and the cross and a tomb that cannot contain him. And so as we walk through this passage perhaps we should keep Jerusalem on the horizon of our mind's eye. Jesus is going on his way.

Now a man blocks this way, kneeling before Jesus. This man seems to be on a journey himself, for he asks a pilgrim's question: "What must I DO to inherit eternal life?" We might infer that our pilgrim is a man of action. He's a "do-er." His concern is how to act, what must be performed. Jesus gives him an action-packed response: you know the commandments – DO not murder, DO not commit adultery, so forth and so on. The man says, quite sincerely I think, "I have kept these for some time now." I've been DOING all those things. Now Jesus looks at the man. Jesus sees the man in his wholeness, as a man on his way. Jesus sees the man is lacking one thing.

Now if we look at the laundry list of commandments that Jesus has just given, we discover something rather interesting. The list comes from the Ten Commandments, but he doesn't name all ten. In fact Jesus seems rather deliberate about the ones he names: do not murder is #6, do not commit adultery is #7, do not steal is #8, do not bear false witness is #9, do not defraud encompasses 8, 9, and 10, and honor your father and mother is #5. What about the first four commandments? If we look at the Ten Commandments we can easily put the first four in one group, and the last six in a second group, each group reflecting how we live out specifically the Great Commandment to love God with all our hearts, souls, and minds, and love our neighbors as ourselves. The last six commandments have everything to do with the love of neighbor. The first four commandments – you shall have only one God, you shall not make idols, you shall honor the name of God, you shall keep holy the Sabbath – have everything to do with loving God. This pilgrim kneeling before Jesus has incorporated into his life the acts that reflect the love of neighbor. But Jesus sees that the man lacks the acts that reflect the love of God.

This is quite a conundrum for this man. He asks for relationship – eternal life with God – but he can only understand the "how" in terms of actions. Jesus responds with love. We hear that Jesus first "loved" this man before Jesus tells him what he lacks and must be done. And here we find the very specific love of "agape love" that I spoke of last Sunday. Agape is the deepest of loves, which is nothing less than the love of God. It is the love that pours oneself out, yes, but always with the purpose of a new creation. Agape seeks to transform the world in imago Dei: the image of God. Jesus is trying to love this man into the image of God. This is love that is not all warm and fuzzy. This is love acting to transform.

Jesus gives the wealthy man a pilgrim's answer. Go. Sell all that you own. Give the money to the poor. And then join me on my way. Jesus offers the man relationship by means of asking him to commit an act of surrender. Now the point is not to eradicate poverty in their land. The endpoint is for this man to walk with Jesus, with God incarnate by letting go of other paths. The act is not external only, although it does have its outward and visible sign. The true act for this man is an interior move. Loving God with all that we are is first and foremost an interior move. We pour out ourselves to God. The external "sign" of this interior state of love is letting go and following. For this particular man loving God meant he had to let go of all that gave him power and identity and status. His love of wealth and all the ancillary attachments had to die so that his love of God might live.

Quite by accident – if you believe in such things – I discovered a wonderful illustration of this reality in a classroom with four-year olds. I was talking with them about light. And I showed them three different things: a solitary wick, a one-inch candle, and a big fat four-inch candle. I explained that God wants us all to burn with the light of Christ. But we cannot do that alone. I lit the waxless wick, and we watched it burn erratically and quickly, sputtering before it quickly went out. I then lit the one-inch candle, and we watched it burn steady and true. I explained that God gives us gifts that are kind of like the candle wax around the wick: they help to keep the light shining brightly all the time. Some of these gifts are our scriptures, some are our personal abilities, some of the gifts are the people who love us in this world. I told them God gives us just what we need to shine with God's love. I then lit the largest one, saying, "Let's pretend this one was just the same size as the one-inch candle. But this candle wanted to be bigger and larger and more powerful. So it got more stuff, and now it is a LOT bigger than this other one. But look at them. Does the larger candle – the one that seems to have more "stuff" – burn any brighter than the thinner candle?" They looked, and they all said, "No." And I went on to say that the stuff we add on does nothing to add to the light of Christ. And I asked them which of these candles they wanted to be, and true to form they picked the bigger candle. As we were talking the children began telling me about all their stuff they had, and why having stuff was good, until one little boy interrupted us, saying, "I don't think I want to be that big candle." "I thought you did," I pressed. "Not any more." "Why?" I asked. He pointed and said, "Look." And lo and behold, the four-inch candle's flame had gone out, drowning in its own wax.

I believe this is what Jesus is getting at in our gospel lesson today. The man lacked one thing: the interior move of loving God with all his heart, all his soul, and all his mind. He kept the last six commandments, but he did so outside of agape love. He had surrounded himself with so many layers of those things that gave him comfort and security in this world that his light was guttering and sputtering. At some level this must have been what brought him on his knees to Jesus. The remedy that Jesus prescribes is a shedding away of all the extra added-on layers, the unnecessary wax, letting go so that he might live. It's a diet plan fit for camels with an itch to pass through a needle's eye. For this particular man what had to be shed was the wealth that was what defined for him life and security. And when this man turns away in sadness – going his own way – Jesus reminds his disciples and us that we will not find eternal life in wealth, or power, or the admiration of others; our flame – this *imago Dei* – will simply drown in a pool of our "stuff." If it is eternal life we are seeking we need to learn – and relearn! – that internal move of letting go.

This is why Jesus speaks in the language of the love he lived out every day, agape love, the love that creates in surrendering. From the dusty road to Jerusalem to the hard cross of Golgotha to the emancipated tomb of that first Easter Jesus let go of everything, and in so doing a new creation began, a creation intended for you and for me to live into.

Now the interior move is an intentional act. You have to want to do it. I would go so far as to say you have to practice it. And so I would like to invite you to imagine yourself as a fellow pilgrim on that road encountering Jesus. None of us walk perfectly with him, and so we have no need to be shy about putting ourselves before Jesus as this man did. And as you picture yourself kneeling before Jesus on his way I would invite you to consider the question, "What is the one thing I lack? What is it that keeps me from completely surrendering myself to God in love? What in my life drowns out the light of Christ?" Maybe it is wealth, or the lack thereof. Perhaps it is ambition, or fear, or power, or the clinging need of others, or some other addiction. Maybe it is an old wound that I am not yet willing to forgive. Perhaps it is a physical illness or disease. Once

you have identified what “it” is, then I invite you to try something. Daily in your prayer offer that “thing” up to God. If you have never done this before, I highly recommend it. If for example – following Jesus’ lead – the barrier is money just pray daily for a month, “Lord, have it. All that I own is yours.” Remember, this is simply an interior move. Your bank account balance won’t change. But YOU will change, and the place of money (or fear or power or prestige or infirmity) will no longer hold that position of primacy in your life Your identity will no longer be neck-deep in this “waxy stuff” that has nothing to do with the you whom God loves. And you may be surprised by what grows out of that change. The light of you - imago Dei - will grow brighter freed from false security, false power, false love.

The way of eternal life is precisely this dynamic of pouring out oneself in love for God and receiving back the love of God a hundred times over, only to be poured out and returned again and again. There is no greater joy. It is Jesus’ way. It is the pilgrim’s way. It is our way. And to God be the glory.