Sermon on Proper 28 2015

What lines or words shimmer at you from the gospel story we just read?

Anyone want to take a gander? For me it’s “Jesus, looking at him, loved him.”

I’m betting I wouldn’t have such a reaction to someone who’s just claimed such moral superiority: he’s just claimed to have kept all the commandments Jesus has cited perfectly since his youth!

Job, in a couple of the verses omitted from our first reading, claims something similar.

Of course in Job’s case he’s lamenting, his “keeping of the law” the reason why he shouldn’t be suffering whereas in our gospel reading the man seems to be trying to justify his lifestyle for we learn he has many possessions.

In our gospel the man makes his claim to moral perfection in a famous exchange occasioned by his equally famous question, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

I’m betting that if you were to convene a delegation of wise people down through the ages and ask them to come up with the most important question of all *that* would be the question of choice!

I’d bet on that question because it’s not asking what we may think it’s asking! Under the influence of many historical realities we have formed an impression of “inheriting eternal life” that would have been foreign to the man and to Jesus.

The understanding in Jesus’ day would not have been something like “how do I get to some purely other-worldly heaven after I die?” but, rather, “how can I live into God’s purposes, God’s way of doing things in such a way that I and indeed, my society, can forward that agenda, and therefore participate in the Life that truly matters, now and, it logically follows, in whatever comes next?”

There was, in other words, no perceived daylight between what God wanted and what was the best human life imaginable.

This is why it’s the greatest question. All other questions, even the greatest political and scientific questions e.g. “what form of government is the most just?” or “how can we save our planet?” fall within it. If you get the answer to “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” right you’re well on the way to answering all other big questions.

On this understanding “treasure in heaven” isn’t something you draw on after you die; that would be like saying that having money in the bank means you can only spend money *in* the bank!

No! “Treasure in heaven” is not, first of all, spent in “heaven,” however we understand it, but rather it’s the investment you make in the divine-human partnership now!

Put this way, the young man’s question becomes our question, doesn’t it? It becomes the question we’re asking in this election; it becomes the question we all ask about our own lives and the lives of those we care about most deeply.

Before we turn to *wha*t Jesus says notice *how* he says it, “Jesus, looking at him, loved him.”

I’ve often experienced “the look,” the piercing, unwavering gaze that slowly helps me come to recognition, “uh oh, I’ve committed some faux paus.”

This is not “the look” Jesus gives; Jesus’ look is not that of a salesperson who looks at you intently because she’s trying to pick up clues as to what you’re thinking so better to sell you something

Not the attention of someone looking to probe your weakness in order to win an argument.

The Greek word used here is “agape,” which is the word for love that is interpreted in the gospels as selfless love; there is no hidden manipulation in Jesus’ attentive look; rather it is the look that communicates interest, care and compassion.

Jesus wants, without remainder, what is best for him, not so that Jesus will look good, but so that the man can genuinely live well!

The writer of Mark is recounting a story in which he is able to project an understanding of Jesus’ look based on what Jesus will conclusively demonstrate about agape/love on Golgotha!

It is Jesus’ manner, Jesus’ love that informs how *we* shouldunderstand *what* Jesus says.

The answer that Jesus gives may indeed be very perplexing to us! It’s an indirect answer “You know the commandments,” and then he lists a bunch from the big 10. The implication is “Keep the commandments!” For those of us who grew up in the Protestant or maybe the evangelical church, this strikes us wrong!

Doesn’t Jesus understand that the *right* answer is “Have faith in Jesus!” It’s certainly not “do the commandments!”

For those of us who grew up Catholic or Anglican “keep the commandments” has come to mean “keep the rules,” do the things you don’t want to do and avoid the things you really want to do!

But the originator of our “faith” might just have a thing or two to say about defining that “faith!”

Sometimes it’s quite stunning how our traditions work against giving Jesus his say!

What Jesus is doing is brilliant. He starts by affirming the context in which this man lives. The man is really asking “how do I live as an authentic Jew in covenant with the Lord?”

And of course the definition of what made a good Jew was ultimately tied up with God’s gift of the Law that had been given to Moses.

Jesus affirms this context by making clear that he’s come not to wipe the slate clean, not to do away with what God has already said; he’s not come to abolish, but to fulfill, to fill the law with meaning that words on a page could never have.

In doing this Jesus affirms the goodness of the law; unlike many people in our culture who have a dim view of commandments and works of the law meant to constrict life, Jews of Jesus’ day understood the whole of the Bible as “law,” whether commandments, poetry or stories. It was a way of wisdom, *the* path to a flourishing life.

Of course, the Old Testament itself knew that this “path of flourishing” was not a straightforward one. As the story of Job and as our lament filled psalm make so clear, lives lived in accordance with the law are sometimes *not* filled with flourishing or goodness.

Part of Jesus’ way of fulfilling the law will take the diversity of suffering into account, validating all victims; by doing this he helps us live well in the real world, a world where all of us suffer in our own ways.

Now notice what Jesus actually says, he demurs as to his own goodness and then says you know what the commands say; he lists in essence and in terms of the 10 commandments, numbers 5-10.

But why doesn’t Jesus mention the first 4? They’re the foundational ones, the ones about true worship of God, no graven images of God, not taking God’s name in vain and honoring Sabbath.

The answer is maybe as shocking to us as it was for the ones who originally heard it. The Sabbath isn’t mentioned for other reasons, let the reader of Mark’s gospel understand, but for the first three Jesus substitutes three of his own: sell, give away, follow me!

The commandments have become devastatingly simple and personal! As Jesus looks at the man and loves him he invites him into God’s flourishing, right here and now and that eternal life is the adventure of following him!

As the Church reflected on stories like this a suggestion began to take shape: loyalty to, an actual following of Christ functions as the fulfilling of the law as the proper loyalty properly given to the God of Israel.

What further took shape was the suggestion that this Jesus who can claim the foundational commands as references to himself and who demonstrates his authority to do so in his resurrection must in some mysterious yet real way *be* this God, astounding as that seemed to them and still may seem to us!

These three words: “sell,” “give away,” and “follow” are the important words, the uncomfortable words, the liberating words of Christ.

Jesus’ love for the man is a commitment to speak the truth. That truth will be whatever unlocks the door to eternal life, in whatever way that needs to happen.

If this man were seeking to justify his selfish lifestyle then these are the words he needed to hear. If Jesus were in Job’s presence he probably would not have said a word except to sit down with him in the dust and lament with him.

Indeed, in his own suffering Jesus appropriates the very words of lament we used in our psalm to cry out to God *lama eloi lama eloi sabachthani,* Aramaic for the first verse, “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?”

The look of love is the same towards each of us, the commitment to non-manipulation, the adventure offered, they are the same, but the words, well they are whatever will unlock your heart or mine.

God is able, as we notice in our second reading, to divide between soul and spirit; that is, to get inside our deepest will and motivation and sort things out, to expose ourselves to ourselves.

The man’s sadness was a sign that he understood that his self-defined life wasn’t going to cut it with God.

Mark doesn’t tell us what happened to the man, whether he chose to follow Christ or not, only that, unlike the disciples who self-righteously play up their sacrificial choices, this man *understands* what Jesus is saying.

In this Eucharist Christ looks at each of us and loves us; loves us so much that he tells us the truth, tells us what is keeping us from eternal life, from the life we try to gain by all the wrong means.

Every week some of us hear. Maybe the words “sell, give, follow” come as a relief from the machinery we’re caught in; like so many in the gospels maybe you’ve got nothing to lose!

But if we’re wealthy in possessions, in opportunities, in amusements we have the added struggle of trying to kick an addiction.

We cannot follow him without following him. Jesus can’t be added on to a self-determined life; a pretty cross draping a selfish heart.

Christ is here, not to condemn us, but as our brother who can identify with all our weaknesses he’s always willing to operate on our souls, if we’ll allow it.

The answer, and our participation in the answer, to the most important question of all hangs in the balance!