

Fire it Overboard -- Pent+20B

“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” “Sell all you own, give the money to the poor, and follow me.” That is the Cliff’s Notes version of this tale from Mark’s relentlessly insightful and relentlessly challenging story. But Oh! how we can be misled and even grow cynical if we turn the page and go about our business without listening more deeply to what Mark has to convey. With apologies to Mr. Cliff and his Notes for whatever degree of false witness I am about to bear unto him, that ain’t the half of it.

Jesus has just finished reminding whomever has ears to hear that the means to a godly life, the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, the formula for obtaining eternal life is to strip away sophistication, accomplishment and learning and approach the Throne as a child. “Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Verily I say unto you that, whosoever receiveth not the Kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

So when the wealthy fellow approaches Jesus and kneels at his feet in a grand gesture, the first thing Jesus has to do is to resist the urge to chide him for not being himself. In this, Jesus does not entirely succeed. He does not openly mock the fellow by calling him a hypocrite, but he doesn’t answer his question either. Perhaps what Jesus would like to say is “Get up off you knees there, Sir. Don’t pretend to be so humble with me when we both know that you are a man about town who is used to giving orders not taking them, and receiving obeisance instead of making it.” Instead, Jesus says to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. And a godly life is not based on deeds, but on one’s attitude towards self. Are you living in childlike wonder at all there is you don’t know? Are you eagerly teachable? Are you honest, open and willing to receive the influence of God’s direction, wherever it may lead? Or are you all set, fully formed, done and done?”

Well-knowing that he is setting the fellow up as an example for everyone who may be listening, Mark's Jesus avoids the man's question by pretending not to understand it. As the probation officer said to the convict when asked, "What do I have to do to stay out of jail," Jesus says, "Obey the law." Reading between the lines, we can almost hear Jesus muttering to himself, "What must you do? You mustn't do anything. You must simply be." And we can also just about hear Jesus saying behind the back of his hand to whomever is around, "Watch this, guys. Pay close attention. This fellow here is exactly what I've been talking about."

As if he is not quite sure of the question, but wanting to understand the man more clearly, Jesus reminds him of what not to do instead: "You know the commandments: 'don't murder; don't commit adultery; don't steal; etc., etc.'" He even adds one to the ten, about defrauding. In other words, 'obey all the holy laws.' And sure enough, the man steps right into it: "Oh, no problem. I have kept all these since my youth. But isn't there something else positive and definitive I can put on my to-do list, or better still give orders to have done so that I can stop worrying about the dim dark future and enjoy life. I want the platinum card. What's the procedure? Where do I sign? Do you take Amex?"

Jesus, looking at him, loved him. Jesus loved him by knowing him fully, just as Jesus knows each of us. There is nothing to do to inherit eternal life. An inheritance is a gift. Eternal life is the gift available to everyone who asks for it. The way to redeem this gift is merely to allow oneself to feel a childlike wonder in the gift itself. All we have to do is set aside, and leave behind anything and everything that interferes with our perception of the presence and power of goodness. What can we do to inherit eternal life? Simply clear away whatever it is that keeps us from knowing that it is already ours.

Nobody keeps all the commandments perfectly from their youth or otherwise. At least I've never met anybody who did. And very few of us are so spiritually available that being free of all

possessions and worldly resources will result in our or anybody else's betterment. But each of us has a mirror to wipe cleaner so that we may see ourselves more as God sees us. Each of us has some emotional cobwebs that cling to us when we turn to hear these stories of redemption. Each of us faces snags and logjams and tough rapids in the rivers of our lives. If we believe that we are not alone in them, and are bound for smoother waters downstream, then that belief is its own performance; it is already so. We still have to paddle.

In the life of the wealthy young man, Jesus could see that his money and possessions were what was blocking his belief. So he said, "You are very close. In fact, you lack only one thing: just go sell what you own, give the money to the poor (understanding that you will have treasure in heaven), and come follow me." When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. The man didn't know he had been asking Jesus a trick question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" It was a trick question to which Jesus provided a trick answer. Because if the man had realized that he already had eternal life, he wouldn't have received the advice to give everything away. He could have kept some, given lots away, sure, and followed Jesus in style.

So we must ask ourselves what is in our lives that blocks our sure and certain knowledge that we are loved forever. What 'some' can we obtain and keep and enjoy? And what 'all' must we give away or just throw overboard because it's no good to anybody?