

28th SUNDAY OF THE YEAR - B - 2006

“He went away sad.”

And we thought last week’s gospel was challenging. *“Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her.”* Even if that teaching is a major step in the recognition of the dignity of women, and it is, it still challenges the socks off of us. And today, Jesus is telling us that being rich may well be a liability to salvation. I had to preach on this gospel when I was living at Sacred Heart Parish in Bellevue. Sitting in front of me were people who had money; evident by their stylish dress and fancy cars. I mean some owned the stores we shopped in. What could I say? *“You’re going to hell if you don’t change your ways?”* I think I raised a question for them to think about, like *“When is enough enough?”* I don’t feel so threatened here today, although this gospel makes all of us feel a bit uneasy. We would all welcome more money in our accounts. Besides, having wealth is a sign of God’s blessings, isn’t it? It’s easy to think so until you read a gospel passage like this one.

Right off the bat we know having wealth is not enough. The rich young man was wanting for more in life. He wasn’t satisfied with just following the law, and he did it very well. And his wealth, however much it was, didn’t satisfy his deepest longings. When Jesus asked him about the commandments, he said he’d done all that. (Did you notice that Jesus added one? Do not defraud. I wonder why?) He kept all the rules, and still his heart called out for something more. And he had a good heart. He wanted to do what was right. He wanted eternal life. And Jesus saw that goodness, and looked at him with love. Jesus not only admired the man, but may have shown him some sign of affection. He wanted him to become a disciple, to follow him. But there was one condition. He had to give his money to the

poor first. *“And the rich young man went away sad, for he had many possessions.”*

One writer calls this one of the saddest verses in the gospel, and the most human. We can all feel for the young man, and dare not throw any stones, knowing that our renunciation of wealth is token at best. This is the only story in the gospel where someone personally invited by Jesus to follow him refuses. Rather than throw in his lot with this extraordinary preacher and wonderworker, he chose to continue his life as it was before, trusting his wealth to lead him and to somehow satisfy his deepest needs. In Robert Frost’s familiar poem, “The Road Not Taken,” he tells of coming to a road in the woods that diverged into two paths. Both paths looked grassy and appealing. He chose the one *“less traveled by,”* intending to leave the other for another day, and ends his poem by saying, *“And that has made all the difference.”* The rich young man chose to follow the road *more traveled by,* and that made all the difference, too. But the poor guy had no idea how much he had given up to keep his possessions.

We don’t think of it like that very often, do we? How much people may be giving up to keep their wealth. We live under the illusion that money will buy us happiness. Jesus is telling us that there is more to living the Christian life than that. There is more to it than just avoiding evil. It is a call to live the way of love. Happiness, according to St. Thomas Aquinas is not an emotion we try to cultivate, to feel good and avoid pain. Happiness comes from the realization of our being, from living our humanity “full stretch” (flat out). And to live our humanity full stretch is to turn outward in loving service to others. We are to live as God created us to live, just as he created birds to fly and fish to swim. He created us in his image so we would give of ourselves to others so others could live. And in the giving of

ourselves away in love, we find our true selves. We become who we are. *“What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose himself in the process?”*

Actually, we can't earn happiness anyway. Maybe that is why having wealth is so dangerous. We think we earn everything of value. We don't want to be indebted to anyone. Wealth gives the illusion of power, the illusion of importance, the illusion of worth. Maybe that is what turned the rich young man away, we don't know. Why would he risk losing that to follow this Jesus? We hear people say things like, *“He is worth a million dollars, or ten million, or three billion dollars.”* Well, that's fine, but it's not true. They are worth a whole lot more than that. They are worth the blood of Jesus on the cross who looks at all of us with love. When we realize that, we know we have taken the road less traveled, and it will make all the difference.

Now, what would happen if all those people united to address the issues of our day not looking for personal gain, wealth, power over anyone else, or political influence? What if they just came together because they wanted to make a positive difference in their community, or even parish? What if good people got their heads together to solve problems that no one else is addressing, so that they and others could live better lives?

If I'm not mistaken, that is what the **Sound Alliance Listening Session** is all about. Remember, Deacon Del Hoover spoke of it a few weeks ago. It will be at 7:30 in the evening a week from Wednesday, that is October 25th, in the parish hall. Come. Gather with others who want to make a difference for the better in our community. The session will last an hour and a half. Come with your concerns and worries. Come with the wealth of your ideas and the riches of your hopes. Who knows where it will

go? It could go where no one has gone before! Oh no, they've already been there on Star Trek. Come to the listening session anyway.

May the Eucharist we now celebrate fill us with the wealth of God's love. May it strengthen us on our way.