

FILLING A CHERRY BASKET WITH WATER

Sermon for Pentecost 20B-Mk 10:17-31

LPC, 10/11/15

I was raised to place a high value on duty. Part of this was surely because I was raised by parents of the WWII generation, who took duty very seriously. But I've noticed that not all of my contemporaries, who had parents of the same generation, got the same message. My generation was the same one that tuned in, turned on and dropped out. You may be interested to know that I tried that approach to life and it turns out I'm not very good at it.

My parents were both oldest siblings in their families of origin, and family psychologists tell us that oldests tend to be particularly responsible. So that was also probably a factor in my duty-oriented upbringing. I was also raised in New England, where the Yankee tradition of taking care of your own business without bothering other people was strong. And I grew up a Congregationalist, in the Calvinist tradition, which emphasizes Christian responsibility.

All of this had the effect of impressing upon me that what I wanted and desired was a distant second to the priority of doing what I knew I had to do, or what I ought to do. This is not an altogether bad message to convey to a young person. But it was easy then to go from subjugating personal desires to assuming that all desires are bad. In other words, I began unconsciously to accept the notion that "If it feels good it must be a sin." To want is bad.

The unfortunate thing about assuming all desires are bad is that there is no way ever to be good, because human beings are created to desire. God created human beings for Godself, which means that human beings are made to want God. It's in our DNA. We are preprogrammed to live in relationship with God. We are incomplete when we don't live in relationship with God. Just as we are made to run on food and water and air, and we experience want when we run out of food and water and air, we are made to run on God, and we experience want when we run out of God.

Now of course we can't run out of God. God is eternal and God is everywhere. But we can't fully obtain or consume God, so we are continually in want of God, just as we are in continual need of air or food to live. Often we are not aware of wanting air or food until we are in a stuffy place or hungry, and becoming aware of our want is our clue to take life-saving steps. Just like this, we are not always aware of our want of God, but becoming aware of our want for God is life-saving. This kind of wanting obviously is good.

So, we are created with an inborn want of God, a God-shaped hole inside, as St. Augustine put it. As we go through life, however, we are presented with many rewarding things and experiences. Because these things are so rewarding, we continue to devote energy toward attaining them. We want more of them. And this can be fine up to a point, but you can't fill a cherry basket with water. You can't fill a vessel intended for one thing with another, at least not in this case.

However, human beings can be stubborn, and so they continue adding water to their cherry baskets, continually wanting more water because the cherry baskets, for some reason, fail to fill up. This is how addictions happen. We keep on doing things that have been rewarding in

the past, but are never satisfied because what we are doing can never satisfy our inborn want of God.

Now we think of addictions as alcohol or drugs, but we know that people can also become addicted to other things, like money or possessions, like the young man in today's Gospel lesson. People can also become addicted to pleasurable experiences like sex, or winning, or exercising power, or receiving approval.

In my personal experience, this last addiction can be tricky because being addicted to approval means that you can actually accomplish a lot of good, and be acclaimed and loved and validated left, right and sideways. But when you have to do something unpopular, you can't do it.

I wonder if this might be more of the issue for the young man in the Gospel story than an addiction to possessions. He has kept all the commandments, he says, and he seems to be seeking Jesus' approval. He seems to expect being rewarded for his excellent performance with admission into Jesus' circle of intimates.

This is a *good* man. Probably he was the star pupil in his Hebrew School class, and his mother's pride and joy. Undoubtedly he had come to expect kudos for his exemplary behavior and performance. Somehow he had missed the evidence that Jesus had not invited perfect people to follow him. Jesus had invited rough fishermen, tax collectors, prostitutes, and political radicals. The entrance requirement for discipleship was not excellent moral behavior, but the willingness to leave other things behind to follow Jesus.

And so it is today. The challenge of discipleship is not to be morally perfect according to the rules, but to prioritize relationship with Jesus, with God, above all else. Now it's true that moral perfection tends to grow out of relationship with God, but seeking the one before the other doesn't work. Seeking moral perfection without relationship with God is impossible.

It's interesting that all the perfections observed by the young man are so-called "Second Tablet" Commandments. Look. The Ten Commandments, divided onto two tablets, are not five and five, as you might expect, but four and six. That is because the first four are different from the last six. They pertain to relationship with God. They have priority because relationship with God is necessary to fulfill the other commandments, which have to do with relationship with neighbor.

The young man has been neglecting his relationship with God for the rewards of following rules. And as Jesus points out, God is not only the preeminent good, God is ultimately the only good.

There is a prayer, written by St. Julian of Norwich, which addresses our human need for God above all other needs, and it is with this prayer that I end today:

*God of your goodness, give me yourself, for you are enough to me.
And I can ask for nothing else that is to your glory.
And if I should ask for anything else, I should still be in want, for only in you have I all.*