

Homilies for the Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time:

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Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time, cycle B

By [Don L. Fischer](#)

SCRIPTURE: Wisdom 7:7-11; Hebrews 4:12-13; Mark 10:17-30

Nothing seems more obvious when we look at the Scripture than that it is all about a people who are growing and changing. It's all about a people growing more fully into an awareness of who they are and what life is — and who God is. One of the things that is so interesting to me about the spiritual journey is that so often we go about the task of trying to fix ourselves, trying to change what we see is wrong in ourselves. If we don't understand who we really are, if we don't know human nature as well as God knows it, then we often get caught in choosing ways that don't work. We choose to do things to ourselves that don't really produce what we hope they will produce. It's as if we have a machine that is broken and we are trying to fix it, without really knowing what the machine's ultimate purpose is supposed to be. We probably would never be able to figure it out. How do we get to the place where we can understand who we really are? How do we figure out, in this journey of ours, what our nature truly is? Julian of Norwich, a medieval mystic who wrote profusely about a vision she once experienced, saw many things she didn't fully understand, at least initially. And yet, over a period of twenty years she grew in her awareness of what God was showing her through a vision in which Jesus spoke to her about the spiritual life. One of the understandings she came to was that one of the first steps in the spiritual journey is to open oneself to who God really is. The basic first step is to see God. When we see God, we see our nature. When we see how God operates — and he reveals himself powerfully throughout the Scriptures — when we really tune in to that in its fullness, then we have the best clue we could ever have as to who we are.

All spirituality, then, begins with an awareness of God. All preaching, it seems, should work on this image of first explaining to people who God really is. How does God operate in this world? When we are able to see that, we have a much better idea of who we are and how we are called to operate. If there's one thing that is very clear in all of Scripture, it is that God is relational. God has as his primary work entering into a relationship with us: That's what God wants. There's one single way in which Jesus, who is the fullness of this revelation of who God is, expressed so clearly what that connection is for. Jesus explains how this relationship works. Let's go to the Lord's Prayer, one of the ways Jesus taught his disciples how to pray. What Jesus was really doing is teaching them his theology. He was teaching the disciples how he understood the work he was engaged in. It's interesting that Jesus is praying to his Father, saying, "Please give me what I need each day. Forgive me my faults. And don't let me get caught up in illusions and

temptations. Don't let me succumb to temptation." Listen to that. It means that this image of God, in the mind of Jesus, was a figure in relationship with him, a figure who was constantly feeding and nurturing him. He was constantly forgiving his faults, and guiding him and helping him not to fall into traps. That's the way we should imagine this relationship you and I have with God: He enters into our lives; he loves us first. He comes into our lives to say, "Before you can do anything to earn this, I am loving you. And the love that I have for you is something that enables you to feel this nourishment. This nourishment has everything to do with someone who comes into our lives to see what is there, to help us see it as it really is, to forgive it when it is not as it should be." And when the weakness persists (and it always does!) to be the source of strength so that we don't continue to fall into that dark, illusionary place called sin. That's God's work.

How do we get in touch with the essence of God? The Scripture has a wonderful way of imagining it. It likes to imagine that the knowledge of God is called wisdom. Wisdom. It's something that the Old Testament, in particular, always personifies as a woman. I think it is fascinating that wisdom, the understanding of who God really is, is a woman. In the New Testament, it becomes Jesus. I would say Jesus is a human being, a man who, as we listen to him speak and the way he handles situations, is truly filled with wisdom. This means Jesus is filled with the dimension of the feminine. He has a feminine side to him. He's well-integrated. I would say that Jesus, if he is the whole man that God created, has a strong masculine side. He has a strong feminine side. He's in that sense a kind of autonomous figure that radiates the dimensions, the beauty of both masculine and feminine figures. What Jesus seems to be able to express to us as he moves in the world is the same thing we see in the images of wisdom in the Old Testament. Look at the way the first reading describes this gift as something more valuable than anything else. It says this in such an interesting and clever way. It tells us that if we have the gift of seeing God as he really is and entering into a relationship with the God who really exists, if this is what we want more than anything else, to see who we are through the reflection of God, then everything else becomes secondary. A mysterious thing happens. When we have given up everything to have this gift, all those gifts come to us. After we have the wisdom (and it was demanded that we have this as the primary thing we are seeking and that everything else be put on a secondary basis) then when we do the heart of the work, we gain all of those other things that are often considered to be distractions. It's an interesting image of the Paschal mystery: We give up things in order to get them.

In the reading from Hebrews, we see the image of wisdom described in a way that is easy to compare to the ministry of Jesus. It says that wisdom is like a light. It's like a light that goes off in a dark room and exposes everything that is there. It cuts. It is "sharper than a two-edged sword." It penetrates soul, spirit, joints, marrow. It's able to read the intentions and reflections of someone's heart. That's a terrifying thought — to have someone come into you, some figure come into you, that can absolutely see you as stark naked. This reading says: Everything is naked before this element called wisdom. If wisdom is the presence of God in our lives, we have to believe that this God of ours reveals himself as one who enters into our world and who sees everything. The most exciting thing is that God is not there to see, to search out what is wrong, to somehow destroy it or the one who has this negative quality in them. No, this is the God who comes in to look into every crevasse and corner of our lives to see things so that he might show them to us. He wants to show us what's there. God's response to this is: "I forgive you for it. And I'd like to help you not get trapped in it again." Incredible! This is the God that is. We close doors, we close windows, we hide things. We don't want to look at things. We can't look at things ourselves. We can't let other people whom we love look at them. That's often

simply because we are afraid of not being treated in the same way that God would treat us in our failures and shortcomings. We are afraid we will be judged, found wanting, and rejected. Or punished. What is so terrifying to me and I believe to Julian of Norwich (and the reason why she was so alive and on fire with these images she received from Jesus in her vision) was that she recognized that this is the misunderstanding. This is the misunderstanding that has to be healed and transformed. We can't go around with an image of a God who is a judge, a punishing figure, angry at what isn't what it is supposed to be. If we have those kinds of images, then of course, we aren't going to let God in. We aren't going to let God look at things. If he is the one who can show us best who we are, we can see how the whole system shuts down. What kicks in in its place? Well, the ego. The human spirit that strives to do good, and then to be rewarded for that which is good.

The "rich" man in the gospel story from Mark is the figure who has been gifted enough in his self-discipline and his training that he is able to fulfill the objective goals of the law. He is able to do this so much so that he realizes, "I am pretty good." This question of asking Jesus, "What do I have to do to be really good," is a question for which he already knew the answer. He knew that God expected him to follow the law. He's sort of setting this whole thing up, I think, recognizing that he had incredible wealth. The "wealth" is his performance. He has performed everything well, and he expects this great reward from God. The rich man runs up to Jesus, and he is out of breath. He is a doer; he is aggressive. He is filled with his capacity to get things done. Basically, what he is doing is coming to this figure Jesus and looking for affirmation. He is confident that he is going to get it. What I love about the story is that he also asks Jesus, "What do I have to do to be good?" Jesus says, "I don't really like that image of people working to be good." What Jesus is trying to get this man to see, what he is always trying to get us to see, is that goodness — the actions you and I must do because we are motivated correctly — is a side benefit. Goodness is the overflow from something else. What we are supposed to be working for in the kingdom is to be in relationship with God, to see God as he really is. To let God love us. Once we do that work, the other part of loving and doing good for other people just happens. We end up being good. We don't go after goodness as the goal. We go after a relationship as the goal. The rich man is the image of the one who decides he has done it well, and he deserves his reward. Jesus sets him up beautifully, saying, "Why don't you try to give that all up." I love that the reading says that Jesus looked at him and loved him.

Jesus is trying to say that the one thing the rich man doesn't realize, the one thing he doesn't have on board, is the fact that this God is already loving him. Already God loves him — not because he does good deeds. Because this man is lovable. Jesus asks the rich man, "Why don't you try to give up all of this system? Why don't you just give up all of this goal setting, all of this struggling to be good? This sense of your own value. Give it away to the poor." That's another way of saying: Why don't you try being poor? If he gave everything away, he would be poor. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, those are the ones who belong to my kingdom." The rich man can't do it. He walks away, and it completely destroys the disciples. Wealth was seen as a sign of favor from God, and of course, that also included the fact that if you were doing the right thing, then God favored you. If you followed the law and performed well, then God would give you extra gifts. Jesus is trying to turn that way of thinking upside down. He says, "No, this whole thing about becoming someone in the kingdom has nothing to do with the work you do. It is something that happens to you. And it's a gift. It happens when you allow the spirit of wisdom to enter into you, which is the light of seeing God as he really is. When you see him as he is, everything changes, because there is no reason to work for the kingdom. You

don't work for it at all." It's already there. It's already given. The way in which the first reading connects so powerfully with the gospel is found in the image of giving things up, and receiving in return. The disciples are thinking about this. This statement by Jesus has thrown a monkey wrench in their way of understanding what the work of Christianity is going to be. They are confused. One of the things they do think about is: "What happens when we do give up everything. You say we all have to be poor. Then what do we get?" It's like we can't get past that. All we really want — if we get to the deepest longing in our human souls — is a relationship with a loving God who says, "You are beautiful to me. I just want you to know that I am there with you. I am going to show you things that are really difficult to look at. I want to forgive you. I want to support you in the struggle." We can then see how Jesus says to his disciples that if they are able to give up everything the world considers important, they will be given much more in return. They will have everything they need. It's a wonderful image that helps us to understand who we are and what our nature truly is, and how it is that God has come to truly save us and bring us into a place of peace.

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Grow into Your Fathers

By [Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)

Reading today's Gospel, a preacher's temptation is to come down hard on riches—especially if he doesn't have any. "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Mk 10:25). I shall resist the temptation. Not only because I discoursed on camels and needles from this very pulpit on October 10, 1982, and those of you who heard me have surely not forgotten.¹ More importantly because our first reading, from the Wisdom of Solomon, is less negative, more constructive. Without deploring possessions, Solomon puts riches in a richer perspective. "I called upon God, and the spirit of wisdom came to me...and I accounted wealth as nothing *in comparison with her*" (Wis 7:7—8). A striking sentence, essential for human and Christian existence. To fathom its riches, let me play my piece in three movements: (1) a brief overture on the wisdom and folly of Solomon; (2) a central section that touches biblical wisdom to you; (3) a concluding aria from a wise woman of today.

I

First, Solomon. To flesh out the passage proclaimed to you (Wis 7:7—11), you should go back to the First Book of Kings, a dream of Solomon (1 Kgs 3:5—15). The Lord appears to Solomon: "Ask what I shall give you." The king's reply is a minor classic, woven in equal parts of humility and realism. In summary: Lord my God, you have made me king in place of David my father. But, Lord, I am terribly young [he was about 20], inexperienced; I hardly know what to do, how a king acts. And here I am charged with the care of a people, a huge people, your people. Give me, therefore, "an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil..." (v. 9). Pleased with Solomon's plea, the Lord responds (vv. 11—12):

Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, behold, I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind,

so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you.

As bonuses, the Lord loads Solomon with riches and honor as well, and promises him long life if he will walk in God's ways.

Solomon's wisdom has become proverbial. You remember the two women who stood before him in bitter dispute (1 Kgs 3:16—28). Each has given birth to a son; one infant has died; each claims the surviving son is hers. Solomon calls for a sword: "Divide the living child in two, give half to the one, half to the other." At that, one mother cries: "Oh, my lord, don't kill the child; give it to her." Not so the other: "Neither mine nor thine; divide it." "No," said Solomon in his wisdom. "Do not kill the child; give him to the first; she is his mother."

Solomon's wisdom is indeed proverbial; but as he grew old amid 700 concubines and 300 wives, his wisdom lost its edge. "His wives," Scripture tells us, "turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God" (1 Kgs 11:4).

II

So much for Solomon. But Solomon's wisdom is rather remote from you and me. What precisely is the biblical wisdom that should grace pauper as well as prince, the wisdom beside which "gold is but a little sand" and "silver accounted as clay" (Wis 7:9)? To get uncomfortably concrete, I shall clothe *you* in the garments of Scripture's wise man/wise woman, hold the mirror up to you, let you judge if the suit or skirt fits.²

Biblical wisdom has two facets: the kind of person you are and the kind of thing you do. Who are you? You are experts in an art: how to live well. I don't mean "high off the hog"; you can eat in McDonald's or New South and still be reasonably wise. It is rather a matter of mind and spirit. Knowledge may fill your head: music or medicine, law or linguistics, Shakespeare or Sartre, American history or religious mystery, social or physical science, accounting or anatomy, First World or Third. It fills your head but never puffs it up; sheer knowledge sits securely upon you, but lightly. Technical competence you have aplenty, but this you complement with artistic feel—with da Vinci and Helen Hayes, with Michelangelo and Michael Jackson, with *Giselle* and the *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. You muse and mull over life's meaning, perhaps its absurdity, but not in abstruse abstraction, on the head of a pin or the pink of a cloud; you have a sixth sense of where you sit in this world, how you relate to it. Pious you are, but never syrupy or saccharine. Pious in its pristine sense: faithful, dutiful, reverent. Aware that, for all its mystery and madness, God still rules the world, you have a salutary fear of the Lord. Not slavish but salutary: healthy, the fear that leads to salvation, the fear that is kin to love.

What is it you do that is so wise? In harmony with the Hebrews, your wisdom is practical: You have a goal in view, and a technique for reaching it—through the pitfalls that peril the human passage. You are intimately interested in others—not only in "the people" but primarily in persons. And so your priority in an increasingly me—first culture is the other: to serve the growing and the aging, the crippled in flesh and the broken in heart, the battered and the bruised. You know the human heart, its agony and its ecstasy. You sense our grandeur and our wretchedness, our loneliness, our fear in face of pain and death, our unease and disquiet before a God so often hidden from us. With all and each you yearn to share your wisdom.

Marvel of marvels, you know how to enjoy life: the dawning of a day or an idea, the love of man and maid, Redskins football and a foaming Pub. Oh yes, you sense how imperfect and passing is the world that surrounds you, how sinful and selfish the human heart, how hostile the earth on which you dance, the air you breathe; but none of this shatters you. Through all of this you walk with sympathy and serenity; you enjoy being alive.

Where do you, like the wise of Scripture, get your wisdom? From three sources. (1) There is the accumulated wisdom of the past, the "tradition of the fathers." (2) There is your own experience. From openness to all that is real, you have grown in wisdom, never cease to grow. (3) It is, at bottom, a gift of God. Ultimately, for you the master of wisdom is Jesus. He is the Wisdom of God, in whom the sapiential texts of Scripture find their definitive meaning. He it is who, as Wisdom in flesh, communicates wisdom not to the wise in the ways of the world but to his little ones—those who, like young Mary of Nazareth, listen to the word of God and say yes.

Is this what your Washington mirror reflects back to you? If it is, you may well join Solomon and sing: "I preferred [wisdom] to scepters and thrones, and I accounted wealth as nothing in comparison with her... I loved her more than health and beauty... All good things came to me along with her... I rejoiced in them all, because wisdom leads them; but I did not know that she was their mother" (Wis 7:8, 10—12).

III

All of which leads into my third movement: a concluding aria from a wise woman of today. It is not so much an aria as a dance; for the wise woman is "the most extraordinary ballerina this country has produced."³ Now 40, Suzanne Farrell has been dancing since she was eight. "Balanchine's ballerina" she has been called; for the master "made more ballets for her than any other dancer—23 in all, most of them masterpieces." A *Washington Post* interview with her, published two Sundays ago, revealed a woman after the heart of both Solomon and Jesus. To en flesh still further the biblical wisdom I have sketched, let me pluck four insights from that interview—insights I can guarantee are genuinely Suzanne, because I am privileged to know her.

First insight: "I prefer to come to a score fresh...because I feel otherwise I might be painting the choreographer into a corner. Music inspires me to move. If I know the music too well beforehand, I might tend to move in a certain way, and the choreographer would then have to tear down that barrier."⁵ An insight, a wisdom, invaluable even beyond the dance. If you want to come alive in God, if you want to dance to God's music, don't paint God into a corner. As a wise Jesuit once advised me when I asked him what to avoid in an invocation, "Don't tell God what He has to do." Let God choreograph your dance, write the score for your living. It does not mean you'll be passive—simply pliant, flexible, in the hands of a creative Master who loves you.

Second insight: "What I do is listen to the music, and dance to the music. Every note you hear, whether you're dancing that moment or not, is building toward what you hope to achieve in your dancing. Every note is a stepping stone. I can't start a ballet thinking of the level I'm going to reach—that would rob that moment of its quality. So I'm never sure what's going to happen once I get out there. Because I haven't heard the music yet—as it's going to be played then."⁶ A wonderfully wise twin principle for life in the Spirit. On the one hand, everything, everything decent you do, can be a stepping stone to what you hope to achieve as a man or woman and as a Christian. On the other hand, live each moment of

the Spirit's music, the Spirit's inspiration, as and when it plays. Don't try to live tomorrow at this moment, and don't try to program the Spirit in your personal computer. Let the Spirit surprise you...and then dance to the Spirit's tune, dance like fury, for all you are worth!

Third insight: "I'm not intimidated by having to struggle. I can be embarrassed. I don't always have to look great. Nothing is born with all its plumage—you grow into your feathers. A rose can be pretty at different stages of its development."⁷ The wise word here is "grow." If Jesus himself, as Luke tells us, "grew in wisdom...and in favor with God and man" (Lk 2:52), I too should be patient with my imperfections, not dismayed by my defects, not embarrassed to grow into my feathers, always aware that the task and the thrill of loving God and my sisters and brothers with my whole heart is a lifelong process with its unpredictable way of the cross, a process that will only be consummated on my own final Calvary.

Fourth insight: "I give myself as fully to [other choreographers] as I did to Mr. B... You either believe or not—you can't semibelieve. Balanchine always gave himself completely to every ballet he worked on, always one-hundred percent. If you're given something and you keep it, it's gone when you are. If you give something away, it's forever."⁸ Yes, my friends, a profound paradox: If you want your God-given gift to endure, don't clutch it feverishly to your hot skin; give it away, give it to others. It is, in a way, Jesus' own recipe for life without end: "Whoever seeks to gain his/her life will lose it, but whoever loses his/her life will preserve it" (Lk 17:33).

My sisters and brothers in Christ: We have moved from king to ballerina, from book to ballet. But through it all, it is you and I who stand center stage. Solomon and Suzanne can compel our admiration. But in the last analysis the burning question is: How wise am I? How wise are *you*?

This shifts our Christian focus, puts today's Gospel in perspective. The heart of the matter is not sheer possessions. Rich or poor or middle-class, can you say, as Solomon did, "I account wealth as nothing in comparison with wisdom, I love wisdom more than health and beauty"? Without the wisdom of the biblically wise, you will always be somewhat screwed up; for your values will be skewed, and in a crisis you too may turn from the Lord "sorrowful" (Mk 10:22). But if you value wisdom above wealth, if you rate who you are over what you have, then you need not worry whether you can squeeze through the eye of a needle. For in you there will be no tension between wealth and wisdom, between having and being. You will be open to whatever God might ask of you: Give it all up, like the apostles; give half of it up, like little Zacchaeus; or use it wisely for the little ones of Christ, as so many have done through the ages.

Like Solomon, call upon God for "the spirit of wisdom" (Wis 7:7). Like Jesus, keep growing in wisdom. Grow into your feathers and one day you may echo Suzanne's final words in the interview: "I can't imagine anything as wonderful as what I've been doing."⁹

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Easier for a Camel

By [Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)

Prudent preachers tend to avoid today's Gospel. The wise will preach on wisdom: "I called upon God, and the spirit of wisdom came to me...I accounted wealth as nothing in comparison with her" (Wis 7:7—8). Or they will leave the last half of the Gospel passage alone, and focus on the rich fellow whom our Lord looked on *and loved*. But a homily on "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Mk 10:25)? How brash can a visiting homilist get?

And still, the issue has to be faced. But to face it intelligently, I suggest we do three things: (1) recapture some biblical background, to put the passage in context; (2) uncover what Jesus himself had in mind when he spoke this way about riches; (3) ask what all this might say to us today.

I

First, some biblical background.¹ Little wonder that "the disciples were amazed" at Jesus' words, were "exceedingly astonished" (vv. 24, 26). Not only because it seemed from his words that *no one* could enter the kingdom. What complicated their effort to understand was a powerful Jewish tradition, part of the air they breathed: Wealth was a mark, a sign, of God's favor. Not indeed the only Jewish tradition, but a strong one.² Remember how "the Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning"? God gave him "fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand she-asses" (Job 42:12). The Lord blessed this God-fearing man by giving him "twice as much as he had before" (v. 10). Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, all were rich men; for God enriched those He loved. Wealth was part of life's peace, life's fullness. "In the days of famine," the Psalmist sings, the blameless "have abundance" (Ps 37:19). If the people obeyed God, Moses promised, they would prosper mightily in a land where they would "lack nothing" (Deut 8:9; see 28:1—12).

Not that everyone who was rich was therefore blessed by God. After all, Isaiah warns, "cursed are those who add house to house and join field to field, till [they] snatch up the whole area and become the sole inhabitants of the land" (Isa 5:8). Woe to those who forgot that the source of their wealth was God. But if you did fear God, if you really loved Him, you would surely be blessed with the good things of the earth.

O fear the Lord, you His holy ones,
for those who fear Him have no want!
The young lions suffer want and hunger;
but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.
(Ps 34:9—10)

II

Now what did Jesus say to that revered tradition? He reversed it rudely, brutally. Not only did he have "nowhere to lay his head" (Mt 8:20; Lk 9:58). Not only did he live off the hospitality of others—the women of Galilee, the sisters of Bethany, the magistrates Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, the tax superintendent Zacchaeus. He condemned wealth in harsh terms. "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation" (Lk 6:24).³ It is to the poor that the kingdom of God belongs (v. 20). Ponder the parables: the rich fool who "lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich towards God" (Lk 12:16—21); the rich man who died and went to hell, the poor Lazarus who was carried off by angels (Lk 16:19—31). At one point Jesus called riches "unjust

mammon" (Lk 16:9, 11), in contrast to "true" riches (v. 11). "You cannot serve both God and mammon" (v. 13). In harmony with all that, "Anyone of you who does not bid farewell to all he has cannot be a disciple of mine" (Lk 14:33).

This is raw language indeed. But there is another side to it—a side to Jesus that makes us hesitate about his harsher words. As far as we know, he never told Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary, to give up all they had. He did not announce to Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea that they were excluded from the kingdom. Rich Zacchaeus proclaimed: "Behold, Lord, I give to the poor half of my goods" (Lk 19:8); not all, just half. And still Jesus told him: "Today salvation has come to this house..." (v. 9). Zacchaeus' response is good enough to inherit God's kingdom. This Jesus mirrors John the Baptist replying to the crowds: What should you do? If you have two coats, give away...one (Lk 3:11).

Well now, will the real Jesus please stand up? Which is it to be, no riches or some? I'm afraid the real Jesus, especially in Luke, is more complex than the TV preachers suspect. On riches, there is the radical Jesus and there is the moderate Jesus. There is the Jesus for whom wealth is "totally linked with evil,"⁴ and there is the Jesus who counsels a prudent use of possessions to help the less fortunate. There is the Jesus who tells some people to give it all away, and there is the Jesus who advises others to share what they have. There is the Jesus who stresses how selfish and godless the rich become, and there is the Jesus who experiences how generous and God-fearing his well-to-do friends can be. There is the Jesus who forces you to choose between money and God, and there is the Jesus who loves a rich man who keeps both his wealth and God's commandments.

III

What might all this say to you today? One thing is clear: This is not the time or place to harmonize brilliantly the Gospel paradoxes on riches, to synthesize Jesus' theology of wealth. This is not a classroom. It is liturgy, where we recall God's wonderful works in the midst of His people, make the mystery of Christ present and active in our lives. Not that we may disregard the problems Scripture raises; only that the homily is not primarily a problem-solver. And still, the very paradox that baffles the Scripture scholar—the radical Jesus versus the moderate Jesus—can speak eloquently to us little folk.

On the one hand, the radical Jesus must never cease to challenge us. You see, nothing, absolutely nothing, should take precedence over Christ in my life, his right to rule over my heart. But history, my history, tells me that there is a peril in any possession—whether it's an adult's preferred stock or a child's "raggedy Ann," whether it's the presidency or a pastorate, whether it's profound knowledge or a touch of power, my health or my wealth, my child or my home—whatever I "own." The peril? Simply that it's mine, and it can become the center of my existence. It can organize my life, manipulate me, strangle me. When that happens, Christ takes second place. I don't listen, I don't hear his invitation or his command: to give it all up or only half, to care and to share, to let go. The radical Jesus poses a perennial question: What rules my life—the camel or the kingdom?

On the other hand, the moderate Jesus fixes my eye on something splendidly positive. I mean the gift I have in anything I possess, anything I "own." Ultimately, whatever is mine (save for sin) is God's gift. Even if it stems from my own fantastic talent, that talent itself owes its origin to God. But a gift of God is not given to be clutched; it is given to be given. Therein lies its glory, therein its Christian possibilities. The theology I have

amassed through forty-five years is not merely my theology, packed away in my personal gray matter for my private delight. It is meant to be shared—at times even refuted! Each of you is a gifted man or woman—gifted in more ways perhaps than your modesty will admit. It matters not what your specific possessions are: millions or the widow's mite, intelligence or power, beauty or wisdom, faith and hope and love, gentleness and compassion. What the moderate Jesus tells you is to use your gifts as he invites or commands you to use them. To some he may say: Give all you have to the poor and come, follow me naked. To others: Share what you possess; use it for your brothers and sisters. Employ your power for peace, your wisdom to reconcile, your knowledge to open horizons, your compassion to heal, your hope to destroy despair, your very weakness to give strength. Remember, your most precious possession is yourself. Give it away...lavishly.

To do that, you dare not stare at the eye of the needle; you must look at our Lord. If you look too long at the needle's eye, trying to get your personal camel through it, you may despair. How can I ever reconcile my riches with God's kingdom, my possessions with Christ's command to let go? "With men and women," Jesus noted, "it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God" (Mk 10:27).

It was this kind of intense looking on the Lord that made possible one of the most remarkable renunciations recorded in recent history. This very day, in St. Peter's Basilica, a Polish Franciscan priest is being canonized, declared a saint. In 1941 Maximilian Kolbe was a prisoner in the infamous concentration camp at Auschwitz. One day, in retaliation for an inmate's escape, ten prisoners were sentenced to die by starvation. Father Kolbe offered himself in place of one of the ten, a man with a wife and children. His offer was accepted. The man's number was erased, Kolbe's was inserted: 16670. That day he entered his starvation bunker, an underground pit filled with screaming, starving, despairing men—no light, no air, no food, no clothing whatsoever. On the eve of the Assumption he died, 47 years young, and his wasted body was burned in a furnace.

To such renunciation, the sacrifice of literally everything, the radical Christ invites only a relatively few. More likely is the summons of the moderate Jesus. I see it symbolized in a story told me last week by a Jesuit in our Georgetown community. Last year he left the slums of Santo Domingo for a needed change and to do graduate study here. But before he left he was worried: What would his impoverished people think of this—this movement from Santo Domingo to Washington, D.C., to a life style far higher than their own? Their reply, with almost one voice: "By all means go; relax; enjoy yourself; but...don't forget us, don't forget the poor!"

My brothers and sisters, the poor surround us; they walk our every street. Poor in so many ways. They need not only food but faith, not simply cash but caring, not merely Social Security but the touch of love. For the sake of the kingdom, for your salvation and theirs, don't forget the poor!

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