



A Bold Faith
Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (October 10, 2021)

Tomorrow the U.S. celebrate Columbus Day. Not everybody will be celebrating, though; certainly, not the Native Americans. You see, the noble thought of honoring and celebrating the sacrifices of Italian immigrants conceals the evil done to local natives since the arrival of Europeans. The contribution of my not too far ancestors to the building of this great nation must be decoupled from the tragic moment in history of when Columbus set foot on the island of Hispaniola. The arrival of Columbus, an Italian captain working for the Spanish crown, brought on genocide directed against Indigenous communities. His journeys marked the beginning of centuries of colonization and opened the doors to the trans-Atlantic slave trade.¹

The celebration of Columbus Day reproduces the Doctrine of Discovery. The Doctrine of Discovery involves the idea that someone can “discover” a place where millions of people already live. It sends the message that the violent appropriation of land rights by Europeans once they arrived in the New World was a natural process of history. The idea was that the civilized Europeans had God on their side and the heathens were to be converted or slaughtered. Riches and land were obtained by force and maintained through cheating. This doctrine still forms the foundation for federal laws that control the lives of Indigenous people today.²

The time has come to be honest with ourselves and tell it like it is. Instead of Columbus Day, shouldn't we better celebrate Indigenous People's Day? It's time to honor the cultures and histories of the Native American people. The Indigenous People's Day is centered around reflecting on their tribal roots and the tragic stories that hurt but strengthened their communities.

In today's gospel, a man approaches Jesus and asks how to inherit eternal life. An inheritance is a gift, but he wonders if there is anything he needs to do. Has he done what needs to be done to be considered for the coveted prize? His business mind is sharp and focused. He is aiming high and is well intentioned.

It's evident the man has been able to acquire and hold on to his possessions, not an easy fit in a society that has known the national trauma of centuries of conquest by foreign armies, destruction of the land, displacement of its people, and the reoccurring humiliation of enemy occupation. One must be financially astute and socially connected to be able to navigate the political uncertainties of the times. Perhaps, one needs to be shrewd enough to make new friends in higher up positions even with the enemy, grease a few palms, and become ethically “flexible”.

We are not given all this information and we can only speculate. It's sufficient to know that the man appears to be a respectable and spiritual person who seeks the higher good of eternal life. He is serious about it to the point of “kneeling” before Jesus. Kneeling is a sign of worship and is

¹ [Columbus, Genocide and “The Doctrine of Discovery” – Tuluwat Examiner \(wordpress.com\)](#)

² [Doctrine of Discovery - INDIGENOUS PEOPLE'S DAY neu \(weebly.com\)](#)

done before God. Is he worshipping Jesus? And how integrated and sincere is his worship? How good is he at listening to the One he is at the present moment worshipping?

It is soon evident that the Ten Commandment-based life-style Jesus reminds him of is only a to-do list to him. And when we don't see life as a spiritual existence but approach it from a business stance (what's in it for me?) and a profiteering angle (I do this so I can obtain that) we syphon joy and beauty out of life and our awareness of the divine becomes severely obscured.

This must have given the man a sense of incompleteness and dissatisfaction with life, a feeling that life has lost its awe. But this reveals a vicious cycle: look at life like a pile of possessions to be had and to protect (wealth, status, respect in the eyes of others, power, and control) and it has the potential of consuming us like a dog chasing his tail. We do not feel satisfaction with life as is, yet we can't imagine anything else and default to the status quo. We lose the creative power of imagination and lack the necessary boost that only faith can provide to uncouple ourselves from our possessions' orbit of influence.

The man is capable of observing the Law. Or so he says. But one's perception of personal righteousness does not convince Paul who quite strongly asserts that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) The man might have convinced himself that he has observed the Law, but is he involved in a relationship with God?

There seems to be more to the story. Jesus adds an eleventh commandment to the original Decalogue: "You shall not defraud." Is Jesus suspicious of wealth in general? Is he giving a warning? Is he testing the man's honesty and integrity? Surely, these questions could lead our conversation nowadays especially in light of the Pandora Papers, the most recent investigation about international power and offshore investments and the cheating and lying that go along with them. "Bankers, political donors, arms dealers, international criminals, pop stars, spy chiefs, and sporting giants" seem to be involved.

Mark tells us that Jesus looks at him "lovingly". I wonder what must be going through Jesus' mind at this moment. Jesus looks at him not with a disbelieving and challenging eye; he is not judging and belittling him. He looks at him with a deep penetrating look: a look that goes straight inside his very heart.

Jesus is not simply "nice" to him but "loves" him. There is a difference: he is not simply overlooking the man's unawareness and doesn't want to embarrass him; Jesus is challenging him through love to climb to the spiritual height he himself is seeking.

This look is disconcerting. It can lay bare all our truths and all our self-justifications, all our excuses and shortcomings. We may be able to fool ourselves; maybe we are able to fake our way through life; but we will never be able to hide from God.

Despite the man's self-righteousness and the lack of awareness around his sins, Jesus still loves him. And what Jesus tells him to do is surprising. Maybe this man has done a pretty good job at keeping God's commandments; maybe in his eyes and in the eyes of others, he is good. But being good is not enough. This man's sincere and heroic efforts to keep the Law are certainly commendable, but they are insufficient to inherit eternal life. Jesus asks him to give all that up. He won't. He is unwilling to sacrifice.

That's right: Jesus invites those who are serious about a spiritual journey to give up the transactional mentality that keeps us captive and enter a new sphere of being, a new dimension, a

spiritual and heavenly reality even as we remain in the world but are not of the world. Jesus tells us to sell what we own, give the money to the poor, and follow him. He will accept nothing less than our very selves. Jesus wants to be at the center of our lives and calls us to share what we have with others. He requires a bold faith.

We better be careful what we attach ourselves to for it soon becomes a fastener that binds us. If we become attached to Jesus, we choose a treasure established in heaven (Mk. 10:21; see also Matthew 6:20) and pick up a load that liberates us (see Mt. 11:28-30). This he asks of us while looking at us lovingly. He certainly doesn't want a life of faith to become another chore.

Jesus knows what goes on in our heart, so he adds: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." (Mk. 9:25) It's not people having possessions that worry Jesus. His worry is possessions taking over people's life.

We have bought into a scarcity mentality, a belief that there is not enough to go around. So, we become obsessed with amassing, protecting, and multiplying the things we own. We live in fear. Our mind becomes absorbed with the things we possess.

We know we will not take our stuff to the tomb with us, but we act as if we will. How about taking the faith leap and give our stuff away? How about using the energy, the time, the possessions, the intelligence, and the passions God has given us for the enhancement of God's kingdom?

If we attach ourselves to things for status, power, and security, they end up tying us to the fear-based scarcity mentality of the world, and we live consumed in a life of greed, suspicion, and competition. What Jesus wants us to learn is the freedom produced by trust: trust in the generosity of God; trust in the abundance of life; trust in God who is ready to provide what we need on a daily basis. The things we possess, no matter how abundant they may be, will never be able to give us the satisfaction, freedom, and security that trust in God provides.

In a way, the man knows that but is not aware of what he knows: the fulfillment of the Commandments as a moral requirement is another "possession," a checkmark of personal accomplishment that gives him only the temporary satisfaction of a self-made certainty. He wants more because he cannot find pleasure in something he feels compelled to do.

When we go around doing things that we "have to", we lose interest in life; life becomes a series of demands, and even the pleasures of life are short lived because they cannot sustain the hunger and thirst for something "more": more profound, more meaningful, more satisfying and lasting. That's when our life becomes "empty" and loses its "saltiness" and, taken to its extreme, stops making sense. That's when the earth is separated from the heaven, the secular from the sacred, the temporal from the eternal. And we slowly become confused about the value of life and lose reverence for God's creation.

"Then who can be saved?" (v. 26) Left to our devices, our mind is stuck on possessions, always calculating and planning to obtain more things; our will is captive, our desires are earth-bound, and our heart is sold. We load ourselves up like camels and hold on to our stuff. Idols are the things that take priority in our life; they are the gods replacing God and sitting on God's throne.

But there is hope. The letter to the Hebrews tells us that we have a "great high priest who has passed through the heavens, the Son of God," who is both able to sympathize with our great weakness but also to provide mercy and help. Our God is not beyond reach but is in our midst, in

our muck. While eternal life on the other side of the eye of the needle is a free gift that only God can give, it is a gift that claims the entirety of our lives and therefore reshapes our stewardship of whatever earthly goods we do have.

This, per se, is painful. The aliveness of the Word of God resists any attempt on our side to control and manipulate it. The Word is critical and exposes our attempts at covering up un-truth. Whatever “stuff” we use to hide behind is exposed as clutter from which we need to separate. It requires a surgical action with God’s double-edged sword. The Word is “piercing,” not “comforting.” We lay naked before God.

Following the Christ who gazes upon us in love allows us to see ourselves and our life in a different light. In his gaze our heart melts and his mercy covers our sin. Since we are his, following him equips us to enter through the eye of the needle into a new relationship with God, leaving behind what cannot fit through with us. There is nothing quite so difficult and liberating as being “naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.” We become free of the load that holds us down; free from fear first, and then free to enjoy a new “heavenly” life “gained” in the Spirit of Jesus.

If we keep this firmly fixed before us, what realignment of our energies, resources, and practices might ensue?

You are a child of God, step boldly in faith into that relationship.

God will provide us with all the sustaining help we require to attain God’s promises and not “fall short” (Hebrews 4:1; 12:15).

May we learn to trust, emboldened by faith, and look intently on him, the Word of salvation and our great high priest. Amen.