

Jesus' Countercultural Message

A gospel reflection from Brian Wigger, Pastoral Associate

This weekend's Gospel focuses upon a sincere young man who really wants to follow Jesus. Jesus lets him make a decision based on one condition. He must leave behind his possessions, give them away, and only then could Jesus accept this young man as a follower. The gospel tells us his reaction: "*his face fell; he went away sad because his possessions were many.*" Jesus did not require everyone to give up everything. But in this particular case, Jesus insisted that this young man had to leave all things behind.

Two things I think are notable in this weekend's Gospel. One is that this man was young; the other is that he was rich. He had many possessions. So too, it seems most young people in our country today. What do you think Christ would say to a generation of people who know more about social media, latest technical devices than their religious teachings, who idolize musicians or sport figures (and their girlfriend)?

So when Jesus saw this young man, probably a good but confused kid, Jesus saw right away what the problem was. He didn't want a groupie, he wanted a follower. He didn't offer a road show or stage to perform: Jesus offered a lonely Cross. Jesus didn't talk football or baseball statistics, he talked straight. Get rid of "*the things*", Jesus said, and get ready to serve people. Start thinking about what you're worth, not your things.

The unfortunate thing, of course, is that the story of the young rich man who went away sad is repeated in the lives of many today, though there are some exceptions. Many young people get a glimpse of Christ and go away sad – because religion is too hard. It asks too much. It doesn't turn us on. It lacks thrill.

The message in our Gospel this weekend is countercultural. It's hard to follow a truly Christian life when your life is cluttered by so many possessions. Christ doesn't offer an easy way. Jesus wasn't after money or fame or putting on a show. He dealt with the hard realities of life, and He expected His followers to face life squarely, without the attachments that come with the permissive materialism.

If Christ had written songs about love, the emphasis would have been on emptying the self and giving to others. If He talked about the "good life", it would have started with basic values like truth, honesty, humility, simplicity of life, obedience, willingness to listen, having long-range goals, looking for the needs of the people – things some young people today don't see in their idols. Christ continues to put the challenge directly before people today, just as He did to the rich young man long ago.

And the message to this young man is a message which goes out to those of us who may be more advanced in age as well. Christ makes all of us choose between having Him and His Gospel and having attachments to our possessions. He may want some of us to "*leave all things behind*" or he may not require that. One of the things that He would want all of us to leave behind, at least I think, is the present philosophy of life which says "do your own thing" or "if it feels good, do it" .

The problem, I see for myself is, all too often my "things" get in the way. Christ still calls me (us), but the trick is to go without dragging a U-Haul behind.