

Proper 23b: 10/11/15
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Reading the news this week I found myself drawn
to a story about a dermatologist from Long Island.
As if I couldn't tell by the picture,
it said she was beautiful --
in fact, she'd once been Miss Teen USA.
As a doctor and an Ivy League graduate, she had brains.
She had a husband just as accomplished
and together they had three young children.
They lived in a million dollar house.
And she even supported a charity which provided
free dermatological care to the poor.
It doesn't get much better than this, does it?

And yet...do you know why her lovely picture was in the news?
Her body was found, alone, early last Sunday morning
propping open the front door of a NYC apartment building
after a mysterious night on the town.
Toxicology tests are being performed.
Whatever is finally determined,
the sad fact is that this successful doctor,
this wife and mother,
Ivy League grad and former beauty queen,
charitable worker and Child of God--
this woman who appeared to have the fullest of lives
turns out to have had some emptiness deep inside.

I don't normally notice these sorts of news stories.
Maybe this caught my attention because I'd been reading
today's gospel about the rich man who ran and knelt before Jesus.

This man had a picture-perfect life too.
He was rich.

In Matthew's gospel a similar story describes this character as being young.

He wants to know how to inherit eternal life.

He has faithfully kept the commandments.

And he knows enough to seek after Jesus and address him with respect.

And yet ... there's something missing.

Jesus notices this right away.

“You lack one thing”, Jesus says to the man who seems to have everything.

“Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

If this is true for this man,
if this is what's expected of this man,
what hope is there for the rest of us?

About a millennia and a half ago,
St. Augustine pointed out that there's
a God-shaped hole within each of us.
An emptiness – no matter how full or busy
our lives may seem,
that can only be filled by God.

But instead of getting out of our own way,
instead of admitting that we can't work or play or buy enough
to patch this hole,
most of us are pretty good at digging it deeper and deeper.

Sometimes, we try to fill that hole with drugs or drink.
Or, like the man in the gospel, with possessions.
Or maybe that's what the compulsive busy-ness
of our culture is about.

But sooner or later that patch falls off

and we feel just how gapping that God-shaped hole is.
Tragically, some of us never manage to find the grace
that satisfies that longing.

But I'd like to think that the man in today's gospel does.

You see, the man seems to recognize himself when Jesus tells him
what he lacks.

Sure, he's shocked at first,
and he grieves as he walks away
because he knows he has many possessions.
He realizes that those possessions
are getting in the way of the fullness of life he seeks.

Now that's the end of this man's appearance in this gospel story.
But it's not the end of his life story.
So here's what I think.

I think the man went on his way just like it says.
He thought about what Jesus said to him.
He knew Jesus was right.
Trouble was, like most of us, he likes his possessions.
He'd worked hard for them.
He deserves them, darn-it!

But then the man thought some more.
There was a reason he'd sought Jesus out,
just like there's a reason we come together.
It wasn't a trick question when he asked Jesus how to
inherit eternal life.
He really wanted to know.
He really wants eternal life, don't you?
He knows possessions are nice, but fleeting.
Ultimately, they won't get him where he wants to go,
any more than they will us.

Then it hits him.

When Jesus looked at him and told him what he lacked,
it didn't feel like judgment.

It felt like *love* -- tough love, but love just the same.

Love that lasts longer than our most prized possessions.

Love that gives us the guts to strip away all the trappings
we cling to for false security.

Love that stitches together that tattered God-shaped hole
within us.

So, what then do you think the man did?

What would *you* do?

What will you do?

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