

Matt Jacobson  
10 October 2021  
St. Mary the Virgin, NYC

YEAR B, PROPER 23  
AMOS 5:6-7, 10-15  
PSALM 90:1-8  
HEBREWS 3:1-6  
MARK 10:17-31

I don't spend a lot of time on social media. In fact, I'll admit I didn't even know that Facebook was down for six hours the other day until well after the fact when I read about it in a newspaper.

Nevertheless, with my limited use, I did notice that lots of pictures were posted this week of pets getting blessed at what can sometimes seem to be an annual circus in commemoration of St. Francis of Assisi. His feast day was Monday.

Don't get me wrong, my dog wears a St. Francis medal on her harness and has been blessed a bunch of times on this feast. She's fifteen now and so there've been many opportunities for her to growl at priests trying to splash her with holy water over the years. She's slowly making progress in her spiritual life. Little by little.

That said, it's just that sometimes it seems the emphasis of the day distracts from what was most remarkable about Francis. G.K. Chesterton writes that "compared to most of us at least St. Francis is a most sublime approximation to his Master...a splendid and...merciful Mirror of Christ."<sup>1</sup>

In fact, Francis is one of the few that have come close to fully living into and modeling for us what Jesus is calling for from this man with many possessions in today's gospel passage. And that's really what is most remarkable about the saint.

Mark tells us that Jesus is "setting out on his journey" and he's inviting the man to join him as a disciple. The Greek word used for "journey" is the same word that early Christians also used to talk about "the Way," that is, the way of following Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi* (New York: Dover Publications, [1924] 2008): 100.

<sup>2</sup> Acts of the Apostles 9:2, 19.9, and 24.14 as representative of many examples from Acts.

What was “the Way” like for the initial disciples? They were itinerant missionaries going from town to town. Earlier in Mark, Jesus charges “them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts.”<sup>3</sup>

In a practical sense, they couldn’t do this work if they were carrying a bunch of stuff with them from town to town. In a deeper sense, Jesus also didn’t want them weighed down by earthly distractions.

This is what the man with many possessions is being called to join when Jesus tells him to sell everything and give to the poor. Where Jesus is ultimately inviting him to go, he won’t be able to take any of these things with him. And, he won’t need them anyway.

Francis was able to do it. But, this man wasn’t (at least, at this point in his story).

Nevertheless, this man seems like somebody that most of us might have an easier time relating to than Francis, regardless of how many possessions we have. He seems to me as though he’s far more similar to most of the people that I know.

Francis, on the other hand, was rather remarkable. I’ve never really met anyone quite like Francis. He did things that the vast majority of us probably aren’t going to be able to do. He gave up everything to follow Christ.

But, before we let this observation drag us down too much as we compare ourselves to a man who rejected Jesus’ offer, rather than the ideal of Francis, let’s take another look at more of the details from today’s story.

This man has kept all the commandments since his youth and even kneels before Jesus. That seems like a pretty good place to start to me. And, we are also told that Jesus loved him.

Jesus loves all of us that inevitably are going to fall short of reaching perfection in our faith. It is unattainable to all but the most legendary exemplars we read about from the past (at least, in versions of some of their stories as they have been passed down).

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<sup>3</sup> Mark 6:8.

Matthew, in his take on this scene, makes a tweak to Mark's text that I find helpful, though the overall meaning doesn't really change much. Instead of Jesus saying to the man, "you lack one thing," in Matthew, Jesus says, "if you wish to be *perfect*, go sell your possessions."<sup>4</sup>

The Greek word that gets translated as "perfect," τέλειος, has a sense of completion, being fully developed, or reaching the end of something.<sup>5</sup> It emphasizes that this is something we're working towards on this journey, even if we're not quite there yet.

Our gospel passage began with Jesus himself setting out on a journey. A few chapters later in Mark, his journey will lead him to Gethsemane and then to the Cross. In Gethsemane, burdened by what lies ahead, Jesus prays, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible."<sup>6</sup> Today's passage is pointing further ahead in the story to this moment, but also further ahead in each of our own stories.

We heard how the disciples are "amazed" at Jesus' words about wealth and what he is saying about the camel and the eye of the needle. They presumed that wealth was a sign of God's favor and so, a bit stunned, they ask, "then who can be saved?"<sup>7</sup>

Jesus says that it is impossible for us humans, but for God, "all things are possible."<sup>8</sup> God is looking to collaborate and help us make up for where we fall short. There is no way to do it on our own.

It is something that Jesus then prays as the Cross is drawing near.

As we continue to work on completing our journeys to God, it is something that I also find comforting, knowing my own shortcomings: "all things are possible with God."<sup>9</sup>

✠ In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>4</sup> Mark 10:21 and Matthew 19:21.

<sup>5</sup> Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 995-996.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 14:36.

<sup>7</sup> Mark 10:26; John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Mark*, Vol. 2 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 304-305.

<sup>8</sup> Mark 10:27.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.